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BANDWAGON



NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2011

BANDWAGON

The Journal Of The Circus Historical Society

Vol. 55 No. 6

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2011

FRED D. PFENING III

EDITOR AND PUBLISHER

Bandwagon, The Journal of the Circus Historical Society, Inc. (USPS 406-390) (ISSN 0005-4968) is published bi-monthly by the Circus Historical Society, Inc., 1075 West Fifth Ave., Columbus, OH 43212. Periodical Postage paid at Columbus, OH. Postmaster. Send address changes to *Bandwagon*, 1075 West Fifth Ave., Columbus, OH 43212.

Editorial, advertising and circulation office is located at 1075 West Fifth Ave., Columbus, OH 43212, Phone (614) 294-5361. Advertising rates are: Full page \$100, half page \$60, quarter page \$35.

Bandwagon new membership and subscription rate is \$40.00 per year in the United States, \$48.00 per year in Canada and outside the United States. Single copies \$7.50 plus \$3.50 postage. Please direct all concerns regarding address changes and lack of delivery to the editor. Membership applications can be found on the CHS web site www.circushistory.org.

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ADIEU

The Circus Historical Society's first publication was a mimeographed newsletter called *Spec* edited by the organization's founder Don Smith, who did four numbers in 1940 and 1941. When the name changed to *Bandwagon* in 1942, Smith asked Fred D. Pfening, Jr., then a high school junior, to edit the new title. He did only one issue.

Walter Tyson then published the magazine until 1945. Aside from retired showmen's reminiscences, the historical content was negligible. In 1943 Tom Parkinson wrote the first article in *Bandwagon* based on research in primary sources.

In 1946 John Van Matre assumed responsibility for the book. His stewardship ended with the March 1947 issue. The next editor never produced an issue. Don Smith filled the breach with one edition in the spring of 1947.

Soon after, Harry Simpson took the

reins, merging *Bandwagon* into his existing magazine *Hobby-Swapper*. The offspring was called *Hobby Bandwagon*. When Agnes King became editor in early 1951, she briefly used the hybrid name; by that fall the title was back to *Bandwagon*.

Under Simpson's guidance, the journal finally approximated a real magazine rather than a church bulletin. While only 6" x 9 1/4" in size, it was ably done with justified margins, coated paper and occasional photographs.

Still, the typical issue was twelve pages. Contemporary circus subjects received more space than historical ones, and members' activities were too well covered. President Bette Leonard, for example, appeared on six covers in eight years.

Nevertheless, the quality of articles improved throughout the 1950s as John Kunzog, Joe Bradbury, Richard Conover, Chappie Fox, Sverre Braathen,

Fred Pfening, Jr. and others contributed articles on historical subjects.

The magazine assumed its current size in 1957. While the editorial policy remained the same—still lots of news about members—all issues had some historical material, most notably Bradbury's series on the history of parade wagons.

The content of *Bandwagon*, and by extension the mission of the organization, was hotly debated at the 1957 convention. Some members, including Fred Pfening, Jr., argued that the magazine should emphasize historical topics. Others supported the status quo. The inconclusive outcome was reflected in a tepid editorial in the next issue in which the editor did little more than acknowledge the schism.

In December 1957 Pfening was elected president of the CHS on a platform of making the magazine more historically oriented. *Bandwagon* began to run more photographs and historical articles and less member news. The number of pages doubled in two years, and production values improved. While King remained editor, Pfening's influence increased issue by issue.

Pfening decided to become editor of *Bandwagon* on a Saturday morning in the fall of 1961, minutes after the mailman delivered the July-August issue which was about seventy-five days late. He paged through it with mounting disgust, criticizing an uncaptioned full-page photo, a financial statement that consumed another page, and worst of all, a blank page. The poor lay out and wasted space was the last straw.

Then thirty-six, he brought a unique blend of talents to the position. He had owned a circus, was an authority on the subject, had written extensively about it, and had a huge collection of memorabilia to use for illustrations. To this he added a technical background in journalism dating back to the late 1940s when he edited the humor magazine at The Ohio State University.

From 1961 until 2010, he edited 293 issues of *Bandwagon*, a prodigious accomplishment of which he was justly proud. In 1962, his first full year at the helm, the magazine's six issues totaled 148 pages, unimpressive by today's standards, but the most published in a year up to that time. By 1965, 188 pages were printed; by 1978, over 200. In 1988 300 pages were reached for the first time. In all, he edited just under 12,000

pages of circus history, illustrating them with over 10,000 images from his personal collection. To say he took the magazine to a new level is to grossly underestimate his achievement.

My dad broke his hip as the May-June 2010 *Bandwagon* neared completion. He was unable to return to the magazine before he died two months later. I finished that issue, and then laid out the next nine numbers.

My association with *Bandwagon*, dating back to 1965, ends with this issue. While I have enjoyed many aspects of publishing the magazine, it has devoured too much of my time, interfering with my job, family and friends. The lack of time to organize my dad's collection properly has been particularly distressing. Too often, I have spent an hour locating an illustration that should have taken a minute.

I never shared my dad's love of editing. My passion has always been researching and writing about circus history, and I have regretted being unable to do so these last two years. I am very much looking forward to resuming my historical inquiries.

All things end, and with this edition the Pfenings sign off after half a century of putting out *Bandwagon*. It was a wonderful ride, one that enriched both our lives immeasurably. It brought us closer together in ways that could not have occurred otherwise. I learned so much assisting my father with the magazine, not just about the circus, but about life. I'm sorry dad never saw the issues I edited. I think—I hope—he would have approved of them.

Starting with the January-February issue, my dad's and my long-time friend Fred Dahlinger, Jr. takes over as editor of *Bandwagon*. He will do a great job. Fred D. Pfening III

2012 CHS CONVENTION

This year's Circus Historical Society convention will be held in Baraboo, Wisconsin from June 13 to 16. It will coincide with an exhibition of circus models hosted by the Gollmar Bros. Ring of the Circus Model Builders on the grounds of the Circus World Museum. The museum will be open for its summer season during the meeting and time has been allotted for members to tour the facility.

The banquet speaker will be Vanessa Toulmin, director of the National Fairground Archives at Sheffield

University in the United Kingdom, who will present an overview of the material under her charge. She will also present a paper on Lord George Sanger, the legendary British showman.

The presentations cover remarkably varied topics. Bruce Hawley will give an overview of the Barnum and Bailey winter quarters in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Bill Reynolds will discuss the Reynolds Family Circus, which he owned and operated from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. Amy Cohen and Kevin Duncan Wall will analyze the renaissance of the North American circus in the last thirty years. Deborah Walk will review the career of Hillary Long, "the upside down man," who walked up stairs on his head.

Bob Cline will examine the link between 11th century architecture and cottage cages. Maureen Brunsdale and Chris Berry will exhibit and discuss rare posters in the circus collection at Milner Library at Illinois State University. A group of Circus Kirk alumni will reminiscence about that circus and its charismatic founder Dr. Charles Boas. A extraordinary number of circus professionals began their careers on this show.

The first Stuart Thayer Prize will be awarded during the convention. Named after the renowned historian of the ante bellum American circus, the honor recognizes the writer making the most significant contribution to American circus history during the preceding year.

The auction of circus memorabilia is a highlight of every CHS convention. This year is no exception as more material from the legendary Fred Pfening, Jr. collection goes on the block. Among the items to be sold this year are a group of carnival yearbooks from the 1940s, Bertram Mills Circus programs from the 1920s and 1930s, pictures from the 1917 and 1921 Howes Great London Circus, *Bandwagon* magazines from the 1940s, and route books. A number of Edward J. Kelty's magisterial panoramic photographs from the 1920s and 1930s will be of particular interest. These include Ringling-Barnum inside Madison Square Garden and Chicago's Soldier Field, Ringling-Barnum loaded flat cars, Cole Bros. in the New York Hippodrome, the Sells Floto elephant department, Sparks Circus on the lot, and many others.

For updates on the convention

schedule and new features check the Circus Historical Society's website, www.circushistory.org, the CHS Facebook page, or the next issue of *News & Views*, the CHS newsletter. This promises to be a great gathering full of fun and fellowship. Miss it at your peril.

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Pete Cristini Remembers—Part VI

Wallace Bros. Rises on Remnants of Cristiani Family's Fabled Show

By Lane Talburt

Under the big top, where he escorted a hefty hippo around the track twice a day, Captain Harry Eagles was billed as the "chief animal trainer" on the 1961 inaugural edition of Wallace Bros. Circus. On the midway, where the aging trouper and his business partner Warren Raatz manned the snow cone and cotton candy stand, Eagles answered to "Shotgun," especially in the company of circus owner Pete Cristiani.

Now 86 and retired in Sarasota, Cristiani revels in disclosing how the candy butcher got his nickname. Pete should know, because he and few teenage pals on Ringling-Barnum in 1941 concocted the prank that brought Eagles' train side tryst with a kinker's wife to a grinding halt. At the time Pete was the youngest member of the famous Cristiani riding troupe and Harry was a somewhat older groom for Captain William Heyer's equestrian act.



Former Cristiani Bros. Circus steam calliope on the Wallace Bros. Circus in 1961, the last year it was used. Homer Walton photo, Pfening Archives.

Cristiani remembers that in the late hours following the nightly performance in Baltimore, he and his friends were cutting up jackpots outside Car 91, which housed single males at one end and married couples at the other. They saw a kimono and pajama-clad woman, whom they recognized as the spouse of an aerial bar artist, step off the parked coach and head into a nearby stand of trees. Several youngsters decided to follow her at a discrete distance and spotted the errant wife in Eagles' embrace. One of the conspirators returned to the train, grabbed a pistol and fired several shots into the air.

The woman, obviously panicked by sound of gunfire, ran from the woods and sneaked back into her compartment. (Pete said the couple shared a cramped lower berth so that the husband could use the upper for his model ship-building hobby.) Moments later, Pete and his buddies gleefully watched as Eagles emerged nonchalantly from the same glen more than a hundred yards down the line of coaches, apparently relieved that he had escaped unnoticed and unharmed from the after-hours rendezvous.

In the following days, Eagles registered shock and anger when the teenage pranksters took to calling him "Shotgun," Pete laughed. Like any good nickname, the moniker stuck.

Eagles was one of numerous colorful characters who alighted on Wallace Bros., and later the Cristiani-Wallace Circus, while Pete was at the helm from 1961 to 1966.

During the previous decade Pete was the most recognizable Cristiani figure on the midways of the King, King-Cristiani, Bailey-Cristiani and Cristiani Bros. outfits.

When asked to differentiate between managing concessions for his family and owning the circus, Pete offered a half-joking, half-serious response: "A lot of hard work."

Cristiani carved out his own unique path en route to his joining the elite fraternity of tanbark titans.

Unlike contemporaries who prided themselves on being able to do just about any job around the lot, Pete had no such pretense. Nor did he resort to clawing his way through the ranks of workingmen to reach the top rung. He didn't have to. The last of six Cristiani male siblings had the good fortune of being born into an aristocratic performing family whose roots dated back to the mid-1800s and whose presence on any show commanded attention and respect.

A contributing factor in Pete's decision to focus more on the money and less on the performance was the severe leg injury he suffered in his early teens. Thanks to his family migrating from one premiere show to another and later to his own sense of adventure, Pete was able to count among his mentors Art Concello, Zack Terrell, Frank McClosky, Ben Davenport and Floyd King—all influential figures on the twentieth century American circus scene.

Now, as 1961 dawned, Pete accomplished a feat that had eluded his brothers; he was the sole proprietor of one of the largest tented circuses in America. To this demanding role he brought a combination of the Cristiani charisma and his own well-honed talents as a rainmaker—and a hard-nosed dealmaker. From his considerable

Pete and Norma Cristiani with two chimps Pete bought for Norma to work in 1961. From 1962 Cristiani-Wallace sponsorship brochure. Lane Talburt collection.



experience behind the concession counter, Pete knew how to turn on a beguiling smile to smooth the ruffled feathers of a disgruntled circus goer, and, equally important, how to retain the loyalty of candy butchers who not only enriched the show's coffers but also helped transport the outfit to tomorrow's town.

His congeniality aside—and many admirers remarked about his friendly, outgoing demeanor, Pete took no hostages when it came to haggling over price and conditions, or settling a beef. In negotiating with vendors Cristiani demonstrated a faculty to shift effortlessly between confrontation and collaboration as the situation demanded. And when the deal was struck and raw feelings abated, Pete for the most part kept his business alliances intact. That, after all, is the nature of the circus business, where one's bitter rival may very well become tomorrow's partner.

Reaching into his memory bank, and prompted by route lists and published accounts from various sources, Pete reflected on the events and people that influenced his enterprises between 1961 and 1963. (Author's note: Complete route lists for these three seasons have been posted to the Circus Historical Society's web site.) In the retelling he also sheds light on schisms in his family's tight-knit fabric in the aftermath of the Cristiani Bros. collapse. But let there be no mistake: Pete remains a staunch yea-sayer for his family and will brook no criticism of his brothers or sisters. He is, above all, a Cristiani, proud of his Italian heritage.

In the early months of 1961, the owner of a once-prosperous dairy farm on the eastern outskirts of Tampa watched in fascination as a sporadic parade of trucks bearing exotic animals, tent poles, a vintage steam calliope and a ragtag assortment of house trailers pulled onto his property during the early months of 1961.

Out of curiosity, the landowner—a Mr. Ryals—had cultivated a friendship with his new tenant, 35-year-old Pete Cristiani, who was framing a new circus on a 15-acre parcel of the large tract fronting U.S. 301.

"He was kind of a likeable man, an average man," Cristiani recalled in a 2000 interview at his Sarasota home. "And he kind of took a liking to me.

"He saw all these house trailers pulling in—performers and people who were going to join the show. So he said, 'Pete, you're pretty smart. You're renting this dairy from me for \$400 a month, and you're collecting rent from all these trailers, and you're getting more from them than what you're paying me.'

"Mr. Ryals didn't know that most of the people who were there were broke, and I was supporting them," Pete laughed.

"But anyway, we joked about it, and he said, 'Why don't you buy this place?' There were 200 acres—that part of the old dairy; he owned more of it. And he said, 'You can buy it. Give me a few dollars down. I want a thousand dollars an acre.' I said, 'Mr. Ryals, that's too much money.'

"That shows you now stupid I was," Cristiani shrugged, pointing out that the rented site later became the Florida State fairgrounds—the same used in late 2010 by Ringling-Barnum to rehearse its latest edition of the Greatest Show on Earth.

Pete was focusing his attention exclusively on framing the new show. Contrary to published reports and gossip on the circus grapevine, Cristiani's plans did not include Ben Davenport as a partner. Nor did the veteran showman accompany his daughter Norma Cristiani, and son-in-law on the Wallace Bros. tour, Pete insisted. "He never wanted to be around me. He said it made him too nervous. . . He had a heart condition and couldn't stand much commotion."

In a November-December 1970 *Bandwagon* article by Leland Antes Jr., Davenport offered another reason as to why he didn't go out on Wallace Bros.: "It's the kids' show, so I decided to let them



Miss Eva the hippo returns to her summer home after a stroll around the hippodrome track. Fred D. Pfening, Jr. photo, Pfening Archives.

run it by themselves." Besides, the veteran showman was content to continue taking out his merchants street circus, a venture that was far less complex and that had the potential for a better return on a relatively minimal investment.

Cristiani in Looks, not Title

More significant to building the new show, Davenport loaned Pete the Wallace Bros. title—dormant since 1953—and a truck-mounted steam calliope. In return, Cristiani made room on his midway for Davenport's high-grossing "Killer Monster" walk-through pit show, which was remodeled to accommodate sleeping compartments on the backside of the semi-trailer. Pete said he also salvaged a spool truck from the former Dailey Bros. winter quarters in Gonzales, Texas.

Even though his family's bankable name was not embedded in the show's advertising or embossed on truck cabs and semi-trailers, Pete's new circus had the unmistakable look and feel of a Cristiani enterprise, both in appearance and performance.

Chances were very good that a circus devotee walking onto a Wallace Bros. lot for the first time would spot "Papa" Ernesto Cristiani or Norma Cristiani taking tickets under the marquee of the big, billowing, blue big top, the same four-pole tent that housed Cristiani Bros. performances just a season earlier.

The two-hour performance mirrored the Cristiani format: fast-paced, high-quality, no-nonsense displays of acrobatic and aerial skills, elephant leaps, and, of course, the Cristianis' quintessential riding routines. But these acts were being offered by the so-called "little Cristianis," consisting of Pete's three cousins—Remo, Tripoli and Benny—and two of Pete's sisters—Chita and Cosetta. The later troupe had toured a show the previous two seasons under the King Bros. banner.

Conspicuously absent from the Wallace Bros. spotlight were the four Cristiani riding brothers—Lucio, Oscar, Daviso and Belmonte—and sister Ortans Cristiani Canestrelli, who with her husband Freddy and other family members, were off on a South American collaboration with Ringling-Barnum.

Followers of the Cristiani clan might have missed seeing Pete's familiar face on the Wallace midway. That's because he was now fully engaged in meshing the parts of the outdoor juggernaut while simultaneously keeping a close eye on the bottom line.

As a result of the family having divided their resources into two separate performing and business enterprises, no touring American circus would incorporate "Cristiani" in its title for the first time in 11 years.

Pete's Show "in Works for Years"

Having suffered financial setbacks in 1959 and 1960 under the Cristiani Bros. banner, the family "decided to let their route rest for a year or two," Pete explained. But there was no guarantee as to how long Pete's older siblings would be out of the country and whether they would, or could, resuscitate the show when they returned.

These were moot issues for Pete. "His show has been in the works for several years and would have split off regardless of whether the other show travelled," reasoned an *Amusement Business* report on March 27, 1961.

During an interview in 2011, Pete said he was involved in the initial discussions with his siblings in the summer of 1960 over the possible linkage with Ringling-Barnum. He quickly discerned that, in all likelihood, Brazilian and Argentinean promoters would capture the concession privileges and that many South American families brought their own food and drink to the circus anyway. Thus, "there really wasn't any reason for me to go" on the extended trek, Cristiani said. And since the Ringling organization would be coordinating the advance, Pete's brother, Paul (Mogador), who had been general agent on Cristiani Bros., "wasn't needed either."

With the family's attention being diverted, one major competitor stepped in to take advantage of the void. Beatty-Cole partners Floyd McCloskey and Walter Kernan launched a small, 10-truck show under the Sells & Gray title to play a month-long series of Florida winter dates. In previous years the Cristianis had relied on these engagements to provide a financial booster shot for the regular season tour. Pete would counterpunch his rivals' efforts the next winter, but for now his plate was full with the myriad details of framing and routing his own show.

He was not involved in the final negotiations between his family and Ringling-Barnum, which kept his family in limbo during the last half of 1960.

Pete said Lucio, who had managed of family affairs for the past two decades under a power of attorney arrangement, questioned the wisdom of signing a contract which ceded control of expenses to the Ringling-Barnum organization. After considerable wrangling, the brothers selected Daviso as the point man to wrap up the deal with John Ringling North and Art Concello.

The decision to side with Daviso may have had its origin in a flap among the brothers during the final Cristiani Bros. tour, when Oscar laid over with his elephants on the Tony Diano ranch near Canton, Ohio. As he prepared to move the bulls from the compound,

Four of the five elephants on the Wallace Bros. Circus in 1961. Homer Walton photo, Pfening Archives.



Diano slapped a lien against the animals and truck. In a court filing, Diano claimed that he had loaned Lucio \$20,000, with the Cristiani elephants as collateral. This disclosure caught Lucio's kin by surprise, since they were unaware of Lucio's indebtedness.

Pete said he was able to resolve the issue by demonstrating that he had purchased the bulls—and the trailer that transported them—in late 1949 on behalf of his family and that the bulls were registered in his name. Thus, Diano had no legal claim on the pachyderms. During an interview with the writer in late 2011, Oscar's daughter, Vickie Cristiani Rossi, credited her uncle for springing the elephants but also contended that they belonged to her father who had registered them in the name of her mother, Marion. Others, including Papa Ernesto, insisted that the animals were part and parcel of the family's combined holdings. The dispute would be revived when Oscar later asserted sole control and booked the act independently. Pete said that since he carried no insurance on the elephants and didn't want to be held liable in case of an accident, he signed over his interest in the herd to his brother in 1962; Oscar had added other bulls to the act in the meantime.

At any rate, some in the family "were losing faith in Lucio" as the 1960 tour progressed, Ms. Cristiani-Rossi said. "My dad was backing off."

With Pete already committing his cash reserves to frame the Wallace show, the other brothers had their backs to the wall as the 1961 season fast approached. Cristiani Bros. had been forced out of its winter quarters in Sarasota at the outset of its 1959 tour, and the family's equipment was sitting idle at a temporary site in Sanford. The pairing with Ringling-Barnum loomed as the last best hope.

J. R. North was Savior

Circus historian Richard Flint, who later conducted interviews with Lucio, contended in a posting on William Woodcock's "Buckles Blog" on October 27, 2007, that following Cristiani Bros. "disastrous end to the 1960 season, Lucio was broke. John Ringling North was a savior when he booked the family for a Ringling foray into South America the next year."

Conformation of the Ringling-Cristiani deal was leaked by the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* on January 8, 1961: "One of the most terrific deals in years—a sort of cooperative union of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey with the Cristiana (sic) Brothers was revealed yesterday through questioning of some of the principals," reported Lawrence Dame. "Ringling wouldn't talk; Cristiani did, since rumors had been spreading like wildfire in the last two weeks.

"According to a new and sensational pact unprecedented in show business, Cristiani . . . will show in arrangement with Ringling in parts of South America. Ringling, under roofs while Cristiani operates largely under canvas big tops, will follow much of its usual North American schedule.

"Cristiani, including 36 stars of the famed family clan, will not lose its identity. On the contrary, as Ernesto Cristiani, clan chief at 80, put it, 'We very much pleased. Good to be back with Ringling again, our family think. Sort of partnership.'"

An Associated Press rewrite of the *Herald-Tribune's* account may have stirred up some confusion by stating that the agreement was "to have united (emphasis author's) two of the nation's largest circuses."

But the Ringling-Barnum organization, which also had moved out of its long-established Sarasota home base to a new site at the Venice airport in late 1960, quickly put the kibosh to Papa Ernesto's characterization of the deal as a combination of equals.

A UPI release on January 9 provided this clarification: "Some of the acts of Cristiani Bros. Circus will accompany [Ringling-

Barnum] on a South American tour . . . in Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires and San Paulo.

"A Ringling spokesman emphasized that the cooperative agreement is not a merger. Present plans call for the two circuses to run separate tours as usual next year except for the South American appearance."

Pete said he understood that the family was to be paid \$1,800 a week for the acts they provided, plus "25 per cent of profits from the business." In addition to Cristiani personnel and animals—among them the five elephants trained and presented by Oscar and four from Tony Diano's herd, the family took along the rigging required for their routines. (One of the Cristiani bulls died on the return voyage.) But, with Ringling in the driver's seat, the Cristiani had virtually no influence over expenses in staging the show, including lavish costuming for Ringling starlets, and feeding and housing the troupe. A combination of escalating operational costs and the unanticipated devaluation of South American currencies during the tour reportedly rendered the venture unprofitable.

From the outset of the 1961 touring season, Pete fared better than his performing brothers. He was able to use not only the physical assets of Cristiani Bros. but also the family's long-established route along the Eastern seaboard. Cristiani said he did not pay for the use of the idled equipment because he had fronted his brothers a considerable portion of the funding from his concessions earnings to help jumpstart each of the family's five tours. His brothers repaid him after only one season, he maintained.

There's no doubt that his ability to combine properties of the Cristiani and King outfits enabled him to shave both time and expenses in framing the Wallace three-ring trucker. The benefits were to some extent offset by the age and condition of the equipment. From the outset it was visibly plain that the lifespan of some critical elements would not extend beyond the initial tour.

Pooling Cristiani Resources

The five-pole Cristiani Bros. big top, a 140-foot round with three 50-foot middles, had endured the rigors of two tours, and Benny Cristiani's three-pole sideshow top had been in the air for portions of the 1959 and 1960 King routes. The four Cristiani Bros. mechanical seat wagons needed extensive repairs. Pete said he paid off the lease on the four wagons at a bargain price of \$1,500 apiece. "Hagen Manufacturing was tickled pink to get that much for them."

In addition, Pete was able to compensate for the loss of his brother's big-top routines by adding the diverse talents of the so-called "little Cristianis"—Tripoli, Benny and Remo Cristiani and Pete's sisters, Chita and Cosetta. That troupe came over to Wallace Bros. after managing their own 10-truck version of King Bros. during the previous two seasons. The booty from that show included his cousin's sideshow canvas and an office-ticket wagon.

Following the precedent set by many circus owners, Cristiani organized his enterprise under two legal entities. "The Globe Equipment Company owned the trucks (and other physical equipment). And the Sarasota Operating Company operated the circus," said Pete, who was listed as general manager. The two were capitalized for \$10,000 and \$5,000 respectively.

The Cristiani Bros. route was a valuable commodity indeed. "When they signed the deal to go to South America, I said to myself, 'Hell, I'm going to show the route,' you know, that they had booked. And that's what I did."

The young show owner appointed his brother Paul as general agent, taking advantage of his intimate knowledge of the Cristiani Bros. route. He also called on the expertise of Jake Rosenheim, Ed Hiler and George Forrest as contracting agents.



Norma Davenport Cristiani in the back yard, 1961. Fred D. Pfening, Jr. photo, Pfening Archives.

Another Cristiani veteran, Elmer Kaufman, headed up a seven-man billing crew ahead of the show. Beginning in Georgia in mid-April, Wallace troupers were scheduled to travel up the coast to New Jersey and Long Island, New York, then head to the Midwest as far as Michigan, followed by stands in West and Central Texas before completing the season along the Florida Gulf Coast in mid-November.

Pete ordered new stock paper from Harry Anderson of Enquirer Printing. The long-standing business relationship between the two parties would be put to a severe test the following year.

Knowing that he would no longer be a Johnny-on-the-spot for concessions operations, Cristiani turned to a veteran of the floss trade, Murray Whited, "a fellow who had been with me for some time. He knew more about concessions than I did. He had worked for Jacobs Bros. [of Buffalo, New York]; he had a ballpark in Pittsburgh that he ran for Jacobs, and he wanted to travel, so he signed on with me."

Whited, continued Cristiani, "taught me a lot. He was very good on figures, ordering stock. He was very honest, and he wouldn't let the butchers get away with anything."

Keeping Tabs on Concessions

If his new concessions boss had any fault, it was his short fuse with his money-making crew, Pete said. "I had to calm him down sometimes because he wanted to fire a lot of them. Hell, I needed the help. So I'd say, 'We'll fire them next week.' Then he'd cool down and the guys would stay."

Even with his scope of responsibility extending to the show's entire range of operations, Pete continued to keep a heavy hand on concessions, checking out stock to the butchers and supervising the count at the end of the day. He also leaned increasingly on Whited to assist show superintendent Paul Pyle, who had performed similar duties on the five-ring Dailey Bros. railer.

Nick Bengor was another reliable hand, switching easily between assignments as boss canvasman and prop boss. Pete also cited the contributions of an African-American whom he remembers as "Roamie"—so called because of his proclivity to roam from circus to circus—for getting the big top in the air consistently on time. Roamie's crew included a half dozen other black workingmen.

Referring to the seat wagons, which anchored the opposite ends of the big top, Pete pointed out that "my brothers didn't want to use them anymore. They needed quite a bit of maintenance." However,



Wallace Bros. clown alley in 1961. Fred D. Pfening, Jr. photo, Pfening Archives.

he first had to pay off the balance of his brothers' lease held by Hagen Manufacturing Company. "Hagen didn't know what to do with them," he said. "I made a hell of a deal for them. I bought them for \$1,500 each—they were glad to get that." He also continued the lease on ten of the GMC truck cabs which Thornton Motor Co. of Macon, Georgia, had provided Cristianis Bros. in 1960, and acquired an additional twelve vehicles from Murphy Transportation of East St. Louis, Illinois.

Pete also lucked out in the electrical department. His brothers had leased the Cristianis show's power-generating plant to a carnival, the Blue Grass Shows. But he had a ready replacement—a 75kw generator he had purchased for the winter street show that he and Ben Davenport took out in 1959-1960. He also made use of a second generator which his cousins brought from their King outing.

The little Cristianis provided the sideshow tent, built new for the 1960 King tour and described by circus historian Joe Bradbury as "a 50-ft. round with two 20-ft. middles and is a push pole type supported by three center poles, one row of quarters and one row of side poles" (all aluminum). Carl Tyler served as both sideshow manager and big top announcer.

Pete insisted the annex attraction "never made any money with my show. [It was] very marginal. But it helped fill out the front, you know; it funneled the people" into the imposing main tent.

King Plays Both Ends

Another flashy addition was the little Cristianis' ticket-office wagon, which had been a King Bros. midway fixture. Much of the equipment that migrated from the King show had been on Biller Bros., Pete recalled. How this multi-talented troupe landed on Wallace Bros. deserves further exploration. And, as Pete revealed, Floyd King's fingerprints were all over this bit of intrigue.

King not only leased the title to Benny and Remo Cristiani but also routed King Bros. for them in 1959 and 1960. The wily general agent, who had partnered with the main Cristiani family on the King and King-Cristiani shows from 1949 through 1953, was assigning promoters to book Benny's show in the U.S. and Canada. And, Pete Cristiani averred, King was receiving "kickbacks" from

those promoters amounting to \$100-\$150 per booking, depending on the size of the town. The promoters, in return, received up to 30% of the King Bros. phone and gate receipts for each date that they handled on behalf of the little Cristianis.

This placed King in a conflict of interest, Pete Cristiani contended, since King was simultaneously receiving a salary Frank McClosky to route the much larger Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. outfit. Pete said McClosky forced King to give up his King Bros. payola. The veteran agent also reassigned the King title at the end of the 1960 tour, as Bradbury revealed in the March-April 1961 *Bandwagon*. "The 1961 season sees a new version of the King Bros., a title that is getting around these days as much as Walter L. Main, Gentry Bros. and others in earlier days. Bob Snowden is the manager and principal owner of the 1961 edition of King Bros. Circus, the title being used by arrangement with Floyd King. In 1960 Bob Snowden operated the Duke of Paducah Circus. . . ."

Snowden's King Bros. wrote Bradbury, "features an adequate performance with a couple of outstanding acts."

In the eyes of most ticket buyers, a circus is only as good as its performance. And the addition of Benny Cristiani's diverse troupe to the Wallace Bros. roster more than compensated for the absence of routines provided by Ernesto Cristiani's offspring. Pete's show fielded a line-up on par with his chief under-canvas competitors—Beatty-Cole, Hunt and Mills.

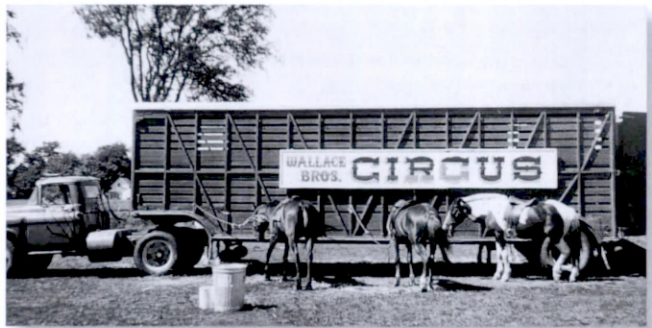
Although Benny Cristiani carried the title of performance director, Norma Cristiani's contributions were essential to the success of her husband's circus. For starters she worked the front door. She was responsible for hiring and training showgirls for web and ladder routines and for shaping the aerial portion of the program. Norma appeared as a principal rider and presented elephants. She also broke in a new center-ring animal routine: two chimpanzees. "Pete bought the chimps," Norma told the writer in a 2008 interview. "He said, 'You ought to work them.' I said, 'Well, Jesus. Okay, I'll work them.'"

"We put a hell of a show together, without much [additional investment]," Mrs. Cristiani reflected during a 2008 interview.

In its March 27 edition, *Amusement Business* summarized Norma's importance in the line-up. "She may be doing a total of eight appearances, compared to seven on the Davenport show."

In the circus backyard, she played a role that she considered even more important in her life, the mothering the couple's three children—Tony, Eva and Desire. In a recent interview, Tony, who lives not far from his dad in Sarasota, said all three siblings accompanied their parents the entire season. He credited a butcher, Herbert "Iowa" Farrington, with helping him improve his reading skills. In impromptu coaching sessions, Farrington, whom Tony recalled as "a very smart man," made him recite articles from the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*. Tony's parents placed him in a Catholic boarding school in Tampa the following year.

Wallace Bros. horse trailer, 1961. Don Smith photo, Pfening Archives.



Pete and Norma were determined to offer a strong line-up of animal acts, a hallmark of their parents' shows. Here they started virtually from scratch. In early 1960 Pete had sold the Norma Davenport elephants to Frank McClosky, who was now featuring the five bulls on his Beatty-Cole show. The little Cristianis brought along two elephants from their King show for the Wallace line-up. Pete added three more which he purchased from the St. Louis Zoo. "They were surplus animals," he said. "I bought them for a thousand dollars apiece."

Runaway Hippo

Making her ring debut was "Miss Eva," the hippo that Cristiani had obtained in 1959, along with a rhino, for exhibition in the Cristiani Bros. menagerie. He acquired both animals from the Heinz family, who operated a zoo in Hamburg, Germany. The rhino later was sent to the St. Louis Zoo.

Although hippos were reputed to kill more humans in Africa than any other animal, Pete's encounters with Miss Eva were benign. "She was a good, gentle animal," Cristiani said. "I trained her by walking her around the track." Her handler, Harry Eagles, was able to "get her up on the stool."

Tony Cristiani was ten years old when he rode the hippo during numerous performances on his father's circus. Because Miss Eva secreted oil over her body, Tony said he always placed a blanket on her back before hopping aboard. He also recalled that she moved at her own pace during the trek around the track, which normally lasted about three minutes, to the band's rendition of "Too Fat Polka." "Shotgun" Eagles halted Miss Eva at intervals, faced her to the audience and reached into his concessions apron to extract a head of lettuce. The hippo eagerly opened her jaws to receive the tasty morsel.

A jolt of electrical current, apparently from an ungrounded extension cord, spooked Miss Eva during one big-top stroll. The startled animal carried her young passenger at a fast clip through the marquee and onto the midway, where Tony was able to jump off her back. Minutes later the hippo calmly returned to the safety of her recessed water-filled tank in one of two cage wagons—the other housing a large chimp—which served as the sideshow front. The semi bearing Miss Eva's cage and recessed tank was spotted closest to the big top, a sloping wooden plank extending from the end of the wagon. Painted metal panels attached to each semi provided the banner line, and a marquee was stretched between them to frame the entrance.

The daily task of changing the water in her tank garnered the show a lot of publicity, Tony said. After the stale water had been drained—normally while the hippo was away entertaining guests, local firemen flushed the container and refilled it. Another ration of vegetables awaited Miss Eva's return.

Wallace Bros. presented its inaugural performances at Warner Robbins, Georgia. Two days later, the aging big top suffered the first of two blows during the season, leaving little doubt that it would need to be replaced before the show's 1962 outing.

Sidewalling in Georgia

"On Monday (17) at Griffin, the big top canvas was about half way up when winds started ripping it," reported *Amusement Business* on May 1. "The show was sidewalled for both performances. Fortunately only minor damage was done."

"The next day at Smyrna, the winds subsided somewhat, but the top was not raised. The show again was sidewalled for both performances as repairs were made to the canvas."

Moving to the Atlanta suburb of East Point, the circus set up at a large shopping mall for a two-day stand. There, "business was



Wallace Bros. concession department, 1961, Pete's pride and joy. Pfening Archives.

great," noted the *Amusement Business* correspondent. "Every seat was taken and hundreds were seated on canvas spread on the asphalt. Concessions business was great; butchers were swarmed with purchasers and would sell out sometimes before they actually entered the seat sections."

Joe Bradbury also visited the Wallace lots in Smyrna and East Point. In his review for the May-June *Bandwagon*, Bradbury remarked that Cristiani "has come up with a truly fine looking big circus. It was a pleasant surprise to this reviewer to see the size and appearance of the show on the lot and the quality and production put into the performance. . . ."

"Wardrobe is new and looks great. All performers make a change of costume for each turn. The spec wardrobe was colorful and the costuming for the web and ladder numbers, in which the show is using big circus production, is outstanding. A fine 6-piece band plays for performance, using mainly old standards with a couple of circus marches and gallops."

Band leader Joe Rossi was joined on trumpet by Charles Mahoney and Bob Grove. Other members were Leo Lewis, trombone; Raymond Penn, baritone; and Al Yoder, drums. Rossi's son, Benny, and his new bride, Vickie Cristiani Rossi, performed trick riding and aerial routines respectively on Wallace Bros. until leaving for a summertime gig at Freedomland Amusement Park in the Bronx, New York.

Little Cristianis Set Pace

The Benny Cristiani family's riding routine, in particular, caught Bradbury's attention. "This is a superb act and these veteran performers of many a season under the big top never looked greater." He also took note of Evie Karoly's dressage and bareback riding turns [she later joined Hoxie Bros.] and the Flying Wards closer.

Wallace Bros. also tacked on a 20-minute wild west concert, which featured trick riding, whip cracking and Jimmy Ray as the wrestler.

Bradbury counted 24 trucks and another 15-20 private vehicles in the backyard. In a 2000 interview, Cristiani said he had bought license plates for all show owned vehicles "from the state of Alabama—cheapest of all states. At \$20 for a truck and \$10 for a trailer, I could get plates for the entire fleet for \$1,000-\$1,200."

The veteran reviewer noticed that "the show is evidently on a tight nut but with adequate help. Performers were doing 'cherry pie' at East Point. Show is moving on time and . . . is equipped to play the big cities as well as medium sized towns."

Here's the Deal . . .

CIRCUS PROVIDES

- A— Its entire and complete show for two performances (more if warranted). The same complete performance in each community regardless of size.
- B— Public Liability Insurance, \$100,000.00 to \$300,000.00. Property Damage, \$10,000.00 — all this insures the sponsor, the owner or lessee of the circus grounds, the city or county.
- C— Its own diesel lighting and power plants.
- D— All tickets—with name of sponsor, city, circus grounds, date imprinted.
- E— All advertising —newspaper, radio, TV and billposting, and its own staff to place same.
- F— Sanitary facilities, for both the public and circus personnel.
- G— Pays sponsor \$25.00 for the cleaning of the grounds.

SPONSOR PROVIDES

- A— Circus grounds, approximately 300 feet by 600 feet.
- B— Necessary permits and licenses—city county, state.
- C— About 5,000 gallons of water. If not on grounds, circus has a tank truck and can haul it from the nearest hydrant.
- D— Office space with local telephone service, for about one month, for the use of the circus promotional sales staff. This staff is under the sole supervision of the sponsor, and if sponsor is dissatisfied for ANY reason, the sponsor has the right to dismiss the staff.
- E— Provide collectors for sales made by circus staff. If sponsor is unable to provide collectors, local people will be engaged for the purpose, and will be paid 5 percent on actual collections. This 5 percent will be deducted from sponsor's share. Sponsor handles and banks all monies for the entire advance sale.
- F— Provide Police and Fire protection—if locally required. Because of the fact that most sponsors are a non-profit group and use their share for civic charity, the sponsors usually secure the foregoing gratis. If you try to do this, you will probably succeed.

SPONSOR MAKES NO FINANCIAL GUARANTEE TO THE CIRCUS. The sponsor shares in EVERY ticket sold for the circus performances.

Admission Prices. General Admission: Adults, \$1.90; Children, \$1.00; Reserved Seats, 90c extra. All prices include all amusement taxes.

*Thru Our Portals Pass America's
Finest People - Our Customers . . .*

Breakdown of what sponsor and what show provided. From 1962 Cristiani-Wallace sponsorship brochure compiled by Neil Berk. Lane Talburt collection.

By taking advantage of various Cristiani assets and by insisting that everyone on the show help with the set-up and teardown, a practice that by his own admission led some kinkers to blow the outfit, Pete said he was able to hold down the daily nut to about \$3,500. (This, according to a Cristiani Bros. financial statement, was some \$500 below the average nut of the 1958 Cristiani show.) Pete said his wife frequently assisted the performers in setting up the grandstand chairs. The kinkers earned an extra \$5 a day for this task, while young local volunteers received free passes.

Even without the use of the Cristiani name, Pete's new show continued to attract large turnouts. He attributed this in part to phone promotions for sponsored dates and the extensive use and paper and print and electronic media advertising around major dates. The sponsors were particularly vital, he explained, because "most of the towns were Cristiani Bros. towns. They were perfect because all you had to do was call the [previous sponsors] and rebook the show." About nine of ten Wallace dates were under auspices, reflecting an increasing emphasis on this technique by other tented shows such as Kelly-Miller and Carson & Barnes. Mills Bros. was clearly the pioneer in this endeavor.

Sunday is for Showing

Given the public's lack of awareness of the Wallace Bros. title, Pete said the word "circus" was emphasized in outdoor and newspaper advertising. In addition, "I tried to show on Sundays, because it was a free day, you know. If you were already set up [for Saturday performances], you might as well stay there for a Sunday matinee. And it turned out to be profitable."

Following a series of stands in the Carolinas, the Wallace tome jumped into the Mid-Atlantic region, playing suburbs of the nation's capital. A pair of two-day runs at Newark and Elizabeth highlighted two-week run through New Jersey.

As evidence of the show's emergence into the big leagues, Wallace Bros. challenged Beatty-Cole head-on in Philadelphia for the pre-Memorial Day period, a move described in the April 17 *Amusement Business* as "a surprise day and date development." Paul Cristiani booked his brother's three-ringer at the Roosevelt Boulevard lot for a thirteen-day run. It opened on May 18, two days ahead of the Beatty show. The later outfit set up five miles away at Lighthouse Field, the spot formerly booked by Paul Cristiani when he was general agent on Cristiani Bros. Both circuses were surrounded by carnival rides and games, with McClosky's offering flanked by an array of carnies outfits and Pete's by Vivona family attractions. Pete padded his Philadelphia line-up with a half-dozen acts, including Rix's Bears. Clown Earl Shipley was brought in to seek advance publicity.

A third circus, Hunt Bros., was competing for the same slice of business in the Philadelphia suburb of Jenkintown, and Hamid-Morton was due to play at nearby Trenton, New Jersey, from June 1-4.

Enhancements to Wallace Bros.' appearance and performance were noticeable. *Amusement Business's* June 5 report on the Philly stand pointed out that Pete had taken delivery on a new red and white striped marquee. In addition, "it is reported that several members of the Cristiani-Canestrelli families will join Wallace after the Ringling Bros. International unit closes its South American run."

For the most part during the 1961 tour, the Beatty and Wallace shows "pretty well stayed out of each other's way," Pete recalled. "Coming south in the fall of that year we were ahead of them by about two and a half or three weeks. They were behind us in six or seven towns, including Lynchburg and Roanoke."

Beatty-Cole billing crews began posting wait paper in competitive towns, a move that Pete insists was instigated by Floyd King. "The fact that they were putting up all that wait paper on top of our advertising, people were confused. They didn't know what show they were going to. But it got people circus minded," which, he claims, increased the gate counts for the first circus to arrive in town—that being Wallace Bros. of course.

In response to the Beatty-Cole strategy, "I sent Frank McClosky a telegram and a packet of photos [of Beatty billboards] with 'Wait for the Big One.' I thanked him for the 'Wait Bros.' paper because it helped my business," he chuckled.

Pete said he chatted by phone with McClosky about the billing clashes, and "he laughed like hell." Even later, when the two hailed each other at a post-season gathering at the Tampa Showmen's Club, McClosky teased Pete, "I helped your business with 'Wait Bros.' Where's my end?"

Hold the Sauce, Please

The Wallace fleet of vehicles had been on the road scarcely two months when it notched its first major accident, as reported by the Associated Press on June 12: "MARION, Ohio—A semi-trailer truck carrying five circus elephants smashed into a roadside restaurant north of here yesterday (Sunday). Three men were injured, the restaurant was wrecked, but the elephants were unscathed.

"The truck, owned by the Wallace Bros. Circus, was heading north on U.S. 23 to a shopping center 8 1/2 miles north of Marion where the circus was to put on a one day stand today.

"About a half mile before it reached its destination, the truck went out of control and smashed into the corner of the Red Apple Grill, a two story brick building, Sheriff's Deputies said.

"The front of the building was torn off, and the driver of the truck and two others riding in a sleeping compartment at the rear of the truck were pinned in the wreckage.

"Officials said the five elephants, one a baby, did not panic after the wreck and did not get loose. No one was in the restaurant, which was closed for the day."

In hindsight, there would have been no accident, Cristiani said, had the original lot been playable. That site was under water, and the Wallace Bros. fleet was couldn't budge until an alternate location could be arranged. As Pete recalled, "Slim, who drove [Benny Cristiani's] elephant truck, he went and got a bottle and got drunk." En route to the new lot, just two miles north, "Slim drove the truck into the ground floor and demolished the restaurant."

The collapse of the restaurant roof trapped the truck cab's occupants. Circus workingmen used a pry bar to extricate the trio, who were relatively unharmed. The couple who owned the building and lived above the eatery were in the kitchen at the rear when the unexpected intrusion occurred. They were unhurt. Unfortunately, reported *Amusement Business* on June 19, "the restaurant . . . was to have had its grand opening that night."

Brunette Judy Smith and blonde Dorothy Armstrong set up wooden chairs in the big top, assisted by two local boys earning a pass to the matinee. Pete required performers to help in set up and tear down. Truck in background carried seat bibles, jacks and stringers. Pittsfield, Massachusetts, August 13, 1962. Richard Flint photo.



On June 11, 1961 the Wallace Bros. elephant semi barreled into a restaurant in Marion, Ohio, causing serious damage to the building. The five elephants in the trailer and the three men in the cab were miraculously uninjured. Pfening Archives.

After the two performances in Marion, Cristiani said, "we got out of town, because we had insurance, you know. But in the meantime, Sam Solomon out of Chicago, who had the insurance company covering me, went bankrupt." The restaurant owners filed suit in Tampa against Pete's show. But when the Ohio couple discovered that the defendant in the legal action, Sarasota Operating Company, was capitalized for only \$5,000, they dropped the case and filed a claim with their own insurance company, Cristiani said.

The circus big top was the victim of the next major mishap, on the same Cleveland waterfront lot where Pete had observed the Ringling menagerie fire two decades earlier. Wallace Bros. set up there on June 30 for a three-day stand. According to the July 10 *Amusement Business*, "On Sunday (July 2) . . . a strong puff of wind tore a 60-foot rip in the two seasons' old big top. Fearing a blow down, officials asked the 1,500 fans to step outside for a few minutes. When the wind subsided almost everyone returned to the tent and the matinee was resumed."

First-of-May "Snow Cone"

When the troupe left the next morning for Medina, Ohio, it was carrying a young new hire, David Hammarstrom, who later went on to pen *Big Top Boss*, a widely-read biography on John Ringling North. Prior to his setting foot on the lot in Cleveland, Hammarstrom used his connections to ringmaster Bob Mitchell to seek employment on Wallace Bros.

In a May 8, 2011, posting on his *Showbiz David* internet blog, Hammarstrom recalled his first impressions. "The impromptu job interview, an informal introduction to 'Papa' Ernesto Cristiani lasting long enough for Bob to tell Papa what a good and earnest circus fan I was, made me a member of the staff on the spot. . . . And what a deal—room and board and nothing a week. Elated was I.

"A few weeks later, thanks to the forced exit of a young clown allegedly caught trying to clown down with a young girl under the seats, I was offered his floppy shoes to fill. My first big top break!"

Being at the lower end of the pecking order among the show's 80-plus troupers, Hammarstrom had limited contact with the big boss during his six-week tenure. He remembered Cristiani as being "a fairly strong character yet with a certain air of quiet class.



Pete Cristiani manning the pass exchange booth on the midway, Cristiani-Wallace Bros. Circus, 1962. Don Smith photo, Pfening Archives.

On the lot every morning—or maybe when the lot was a hell hole needing his redemptive supervisory skills. Before the first show, he was up front in a wagon settling money matters with the day's sponsor. Once, we waited and waited to start. The blue tent was restless with a near-full crowd. They, we guessed, were haggling up there over how much money the sponsor owed the money or vice versa. . . . Finally came the word: Start the show! I took my place at the head of the parade, the band banged into melodic noise and on we went. . . .

"I loved Norma Cristiani. It was she whom I saw each Friday when up the steps to the ticket wagon I climbed, there to be handed my \$25.

"Mr. Cristiani and I only once exchanged words. On the midway one early afternoon after I had slaved away with a sledgehammer driving stakes for the marquee (I still can't believe I did such a thing), Pete walked past me, paused briefly in a glib mood, patted me on my rear and cracked, 'How's Snow Cone?' . . . He was always around, a strong relentless presence, a force you could feel."

Young Hammarstrom observed the Cristianis both in and out of the big top. "Those Italian horse riders were full of life. Cosetta's high-strutting kicker atop a cantering horse, my favorite part of the show, had sass and dazzle, spunk and plunk and a sultry rhythm. Corky, I'd been told, lived somewhere in L.A. . . . Once she visited the show. What a refined beauty was she.

"The other Cristianis who had stuck to trouping . . . sounded at times like a band of infidels stuck together in close quarters against their will. After a while, their feuds no longer scared me. I found them a little amusing. . . .

"What do I miss most at circuses? The spectacle of acrobats running down a ramp to throw themselves through circles and flip flops across a mountain of elephants—that is what I miss," wrote the wistful author, 50 years having gone by since his adventure-filled emersion on Wallace Bros. "That special boyhood thrill brought to me by the fiery horse riders and acrobats from across the great ocean."

Capping off its Midwestern dates, Wallace Bros. tackled a series of challenging autumn stands in the Lone Star State.

Jumping Across Texas

An *Amusement Business* writer who caught one of the outings reported on October 16 that "running time for the performance has

been clocked at 1 hour 35 minutes, with that being reduced slightly at night performances before some of the longer jumps, such as the 214-mile overnight haul from McKinney to Childress, Tex. Route between Sept. 23 and Oct. 14 included 11 jumps of more than 100 miles each.

"Wallace Bros. is moving on 18 trucks, mostly with long semi-trailers. Manager Pete Cristiani said shortly after the show entered Texas that it had replaced only one motor all season."

And that, Cristiani recalled recently, was accomplished by circus mechanic, Oscar Grisset, who changed out the spool truck motor on site in a remarkable four and a half hours.

The *Amusement Business* correspondent noted a few new faces in the McKinney show. They included Freddie and Ortans Cristiani-Canestrelli, fresh off the boat from South America, and a dog act by Alberto Zoppe, who, as Pete remembered, was stranded from another show and needed a job for the remainder of the tour.

The worn-out troopers re-entered Florida with a November 11 stand at Gainesville. The show ended its season on November 19 at Treasure Island, and then moved directly into a newly purchased 35-acre winter quarters at Riverview. Buoyed by a profitable first season, Pete immediately plunged into carrying out plans for the 1962 tour. Earlier, on October 23, *Amusement Business* disclosed that, "Pete Cristiani is reported to have ordered all new canvas for 1962. . . . He also is said to have signed many new acts [and] has bought a new light plant."

In the meantime, the remainder of his family had returned from their southern hemispheric venture with a less optimistic outlook. "They were disappointed in the tour," Pete recalled. "They had the impression that they were going to be playing some medium sized cities [in Brazil and Argentina] and that the tour was supposed to last a lot longer."

Toward the end of the season Pete began promoting Wallace Bros. with the hyphenated "Cristiani" tacked on. As it became evident that his brothers had no plans to go back on the road with the family circus title, Pete put the Cristiani name on all Wallace Bros. promotional materials.

"I thought the Cristianis had a good name up the East Coast, so I might as well use it," Pete said. "It was much easier to book."

In a move that confused many fans in the Sarasota community, however, his brothers announced plans to field a separate new show *sans* the family name.

Veteran observer Irv Edelson of the *Sarasota Journal* was among those scratching their heads at the turn of developments. Pointing out in a November 24 piece that two competing family units were playing in same vicinity within a 10-day period, Edelson added, "Many area circus fans have wondered about the Cristianis. . . .

Cristiani-Wallace electrical generator, 1962. Don Smith photo, Pfening Archives.



"A small crowd turned out last Thursday (November 16) to watch the Wallace Bros.-Cristiani Circus put on matinee and evening performances. . . . It is understood from a reliable source that next year the name will be reversed. The circus will be billed as the Cristiani-Wallace Bros. Circus in an effort to once more bring the Cristiani name back into prominence. . . .

"On Saturday (November 25), the Dan Carson Rodeo and Circus opens at the Cortez Shopping Center in Bradenton. The two circuses contain different segments of the Cristiani Bros. Circus. . . .

"This famous circus family that came over from Italy to join the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus (in 1934), then start[ed] its own tented circus to rival the Ringlings, has more or less dropped from the headlines.

"But the Cristianis are still very much active, although no longer touring as the Cristiani Bros. Circus, the world's largest tent show.

"Why? Anyone in the circus world will tell you the family has had financial difficulties. The Cristianis have made money in the circus world. But great as they perform, economics hasn't been one of their strong points. Inter-family rivalry—different members wanting to 'run the show'—did not help.

"It would be a tragic thing for the Cristianis to cease operations."

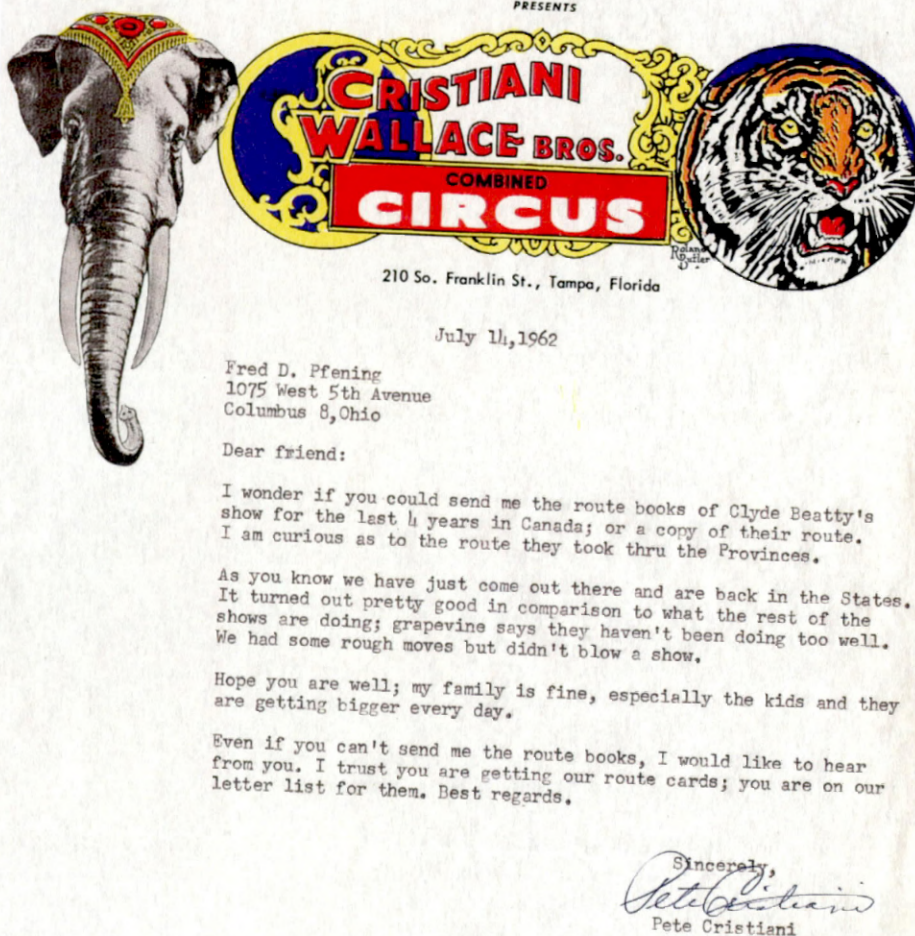
Kinfolk Here, Kinfolk There

Edelson noted the scattering of the Cristiani family between the two shows: "The Wallace Bros.-Cristiani Circus was strictly Cristiani last Thursday in Venice. There was Freddie and Ortense [Ortans] Canestrelli doing their sensational roley-bolley act. Ortens is a Cristiani. There were Bennie, Oscar, Tripoli, Cozetta (sic), Pete, the owner, and Mama and Papa Cristiani, either performing or taking tickets. All at one time had been associated in the Cristiani Bros. Circus. . . . Norma Cristiani, wife of Pete and member of the famous Davenport circus family, performed with her chimps. . . .

"The opening of the Dan Carson Rodeo and Circus on Saturday initiates a Florida tour of several weeks. They'll move on to Engelwood and then other places in the state before a holiday layover until sometime in January. . . .

"Four Cristianis are in the circus 'line-up.' Delilah, Belmonte's wife, does the balancing trapeze act. Belmonte, famed for his ability to leap through the air over four elephants, plans to perform the feat for the 'home' folks. He'll also show his skill at bareback riding. . . . Daviso with his dancing horse and Lucio with his bareback riding—are part of the rodeo circus. Gilda [Lucio's wife] will execute equestrian tricks. . . . Daviso's daughter, Antoinette, does the wire act. Oscar will be at Cortez with his elephants. . . . Also included in the show will be Rex Rossi, famous rodeo trick riding champ, and his wife, Wanda."

Pete recalled that his brothers' circus-rodeo harkened back to the days of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. "It was the type of thing that Tim McCoy had, the long canopy with the seats underneath it. And



Letter from Pete Cristiani to Fred D. Pfening, Jr. in mid-season 1962 in which he asks for routes of the Clyde Beatty Circus. Letterhead was one of the last designed by the great press agent, bill writer and artist Roland Butler, who died the previous October. Pfening Archives.

the circus played in front of it, out in the open. It was a pretty good idea."

An article in the November 24 *Amusement Business* provided additional details about the new entry. "It will swing through the Florida Circuit under a canopy-type spread of canvas, with grandstand seating for 2,500. In a new design innovation, engineered by Belmonte Cristiani, the unit will go out with new canvas and a plastic marquee. . . . It will operate four weeks, close for the holidays and reopen in the spring for a trek through the northern territory."

Carson "Clem" erupts

Unfortunately, when the brothers attempted to take up where they left off during the winter layover, "the Dan Carson show had a clem among the relatives on opening day and split up," reported Tom Parkinson in the March-April 1962 *Bandwagon*. "The Rossis took out on their own, with Ben Thomas as agent. The Cristianis were beating the bushes for an agent and planned to travel."

The Rossi-led show was titled The Western TV Cavalcade and Circus Acts, and its one-day stand at Port Charlotte, Florida, on Saturday, February 3, drew a brief mention the day before in the *St. Petersburg Times*, "One feature will be trick riding by Vicky Chris-

tiani (sic), a member of the famous Cristiani family. Other acts will include clowns, a dog act and re-enactment of the Old West." Tickets for the 2 and 8 p.m. performances were \$1 for adults and 50 cents for children, with no reserved seating. The 1962 circus census, released on March 31 by *Amusement Business*, listed Benny, Jimmy and Rex Rossi as partners, with ex-Rogers Bros. owner Si Reubens as agent.

By that time the disintegration of the Cristiani family circle seemed virtually irreversible. The brothers went off on their own ventures and filled in on Pete's show when they weren't booked elsewhere.

Daviso, for example, signed a contract with the Royal Castle fast-food chain to provide demonstrations of his equestrian skills at restaurants for the next four years. And Oscar's five elephants were constantly in demand by independent circus producers.

In addition, Corky Cristiani, youngest of the ten Cristiani siblings, had been signed to double on horseback for Doris Day in the movie *Jumbo*, with filming due to start in November.

Oscar's daughter, Vickie Cristiani Rossi, in an October 9, 2011, e-mail to the author, looked back wistfully on the family's ebbing fortunes. "Indeed there will never be another troupe like the Bareback Riding Cristiani Family. You see, they were blessed with a rare combination of good looks, phenomenal talent, natural charisma, unremitting drive and daring entrepreneurial spirit. In short, they had it all. . . .

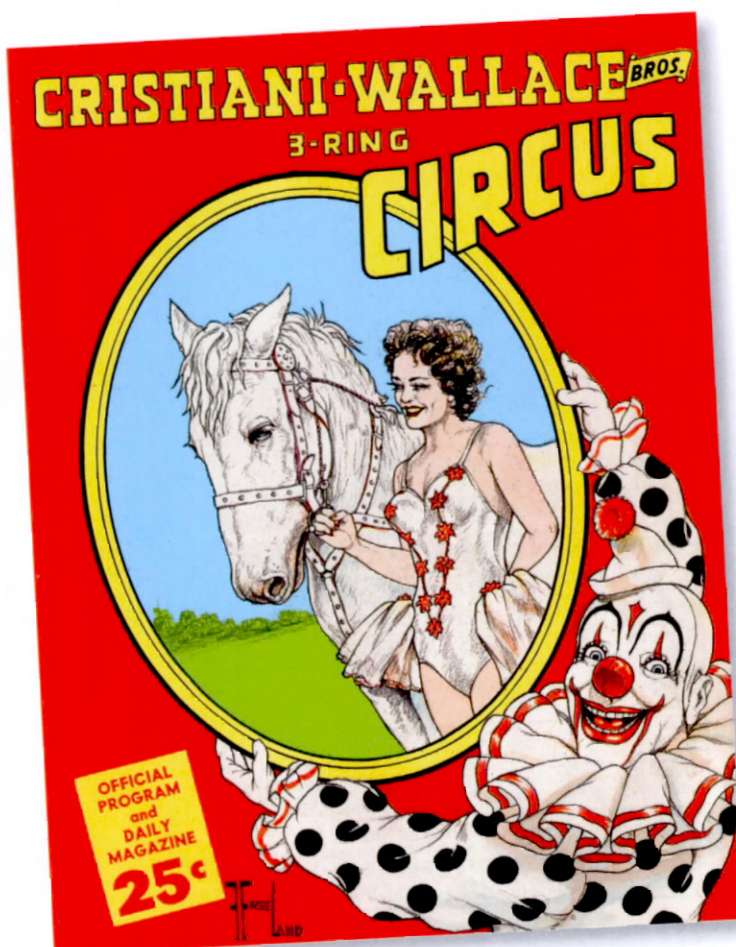
"Also, bear in mind, chameleon-like versatility was another unmistakable trait that they used to their advantage." As stated in *Spangles*, Vickie's 2007 memoir, the fact that dullness never followed in their wake only added to the Cristiani family's mystique.

Cristianis "Hard Act to Follow"

"Strangely, hordes of fans were as fascinated by the family's darker side as they were to their spellbinding reputation in the ring. Same reason fans through the ages have been drawn to a host of highly recognizable 'bad-boy' personalities who challenged the more acceptable grain of social correctness. Human nature craves excitement; we're entertained by people with flamboyant behavior, those who dare to jump off the edge.

"In this sense, the Cristianis were a hard act to follow," Vickie noted.

Col. Harry "Shotgun" Eagles with Miss Eva in the center ring after her trek around the hippodrome track. Eagles carried a half-dozen heads of lettuce, which he sporadically tossed into Eva's mouth while she faced the audience. Pittsfield, Massachusetts, August 13, 1962. Richard Flint photo.



Cover of 1963 Cristiani-Wallace Bros. Circus program drawn by Forest Freeland with Norma Cristiani featured. Pfening Archives.

Meanwhile, Pete followed his winning inaugural season by preempting announced plans by the McClosky-Kernan-backed Sells & Gray to repeat its Florida winter tour of 1960-1961. Pete said Frank Peters booked the thirty-five Wallace stands ahead of the rival organization, effectively reclaiming the Cristiani family's winter dates of previous years. J. H. (Ding) Simpson, a member of the Cristiani-Wallace promotional staff, told *Amusement Business* (November 10) that "the show's Florida tour was marked by big business. His last date, Homestead, on a Sunday, had straw houses."

As he prepared for the second season, Cristiani began culling towns from the route that had produced lackluster results. Asked if those poorly performing towns were well known among competing circus general agents, Pete chuckled. "I certainly didn't advertise it. Maybe somebody else did. When [other owners] would ask 'How'd you do [in a specific community]?' I'd say, 'Good.' What the hell! I wasn't going to help them out with their shows."

To protect the names of his local sponsors and the location of lots, Pete said he never published a route book. His show did mail out route cards, which, beginning with the 1962 season, listed the address of Cristiani-Wallace Bros. Combined Circus as 210 S. Franklin Street in Tampa. The outfit's 1962 promotional brochure also revealed Neil Berk as general agent. Cristiani said Berk came over from Beatty-Cole at the end of the 1961 tour. It was a swap-out of sorts, with one of Pete's promoters, Jake Rosenheim, going to the McClosky-Kernan enterprise. Cristiani explained that his brother Paul continued to route his circus and that Berk served as contracting agent, booking most dates either by mail or phone.

Old Tops Never Die, Just Fade

Befitting its new name, Cristiani-Wallace presented a new image, both in appearance and performance. The Cristiani Bros. big top, after two years of hard use, was retired. Leaf Tent and Awning delivered a slightly smaller cabled version—a four-pole, 120-foot round with one 50-foot and two 40-foot middles. Pete said he chose a white top, trimmed in blue and red, because it was easier to light than his brothers' blue canvas.

But he was not prepared for the hordes of tiny sun rays which immediately flooded the new canvas when the top was raised for the first time at winter quarters.

Traditionally, tentmakers used a cotton thread to sew the four-foot lengths of canvas together. In this instance, Leaf substituted nylon thread, with appalling results. Where the cotton thread expanded to fill the holes, the nylon strands didn't, thus allowing thousands of tiny sunrays to penetrate the covering. Pete said he complained bitterly to Leif Osmundsen, who explained that the use of rayon thread was an "experiment." Pete's bombastic retort was sufficient to secure a \$3,000 deduction from the tentmaker's price tag of \$15,000.

Though the same four seat wagons were used under the big top, the overall seating capacity was reduced from 4,000 to about 2,300 patrons.

Cristiani also had to go shopping for new grandstand chairs when Lucio asked for the return of the old Cristiani Bros. aluminum-and-plastic seats for his new Dan Carson show. Pete initially struck a deal with Hunt Bros. for chairs that Harry Hunt insisted were like new. But when the Hunt truck arrived in Riverview and the driver began unloading the chairs, Pete inspected the first 50 and discovered that most either couldn't be opened or needed repair. He rejected the shipment and immediately called Harry Hunt to cancel the sale. In all likelihood, these were the chairs that the New Jersey showman had acquired from the two failed King Bros. units in 1956.

Czech Out These Chairs

With the 1962 launch date fast approaching, Pete desperately sought out other sources. After a Pennsylvania manufacturer quoted him a price of \$4.50 apiece, the tight-fisted owner scouted out a Tampa businessman who offered Czech-made wooden folding seats at a much lower cost. Pete feigned that he was buying the chairs on behalf of a tent-revival evangelist and pleaded for an even

steeper discount. Asked how many chairs the Bible thumper needed, Pete replied, "Fifteen-hundred." By shrewdly snookering the dealer into revealing his source, Cristiani said he bypassed the local merchant and negotiated directly with the wholesaler, whittling the final price down to \$1.70 per chair. He then dispatched Paul Pyle with the show's advance truck and a cashier's check to a Brooklyn warehouse to pick up the cargo of imported chairs.

By ditching the old big top in favor of the smaller, lighter canvas—requiring one, not two spool trucks; by eliminating the calliope—"I couldn't get parade permits in some towns, so I decided to leave it home," Pete commented; and by combining the ticket wagon with the concessions trailer, the economy-minded owner was able to trim the show-owned fleet by three vehicles and carry the show on 21 trucks.

In another pre-season transaction, he acquired a liberty horse act from Vernon Pratt of Hugo, Oklahoma. Duke Jenson broke in the new act and presented it on the road.

The newly repainted fleet, bearing the title of Cristiani-Wallace Combined Circus, made a 400-mile jump from Riverview to Warner Robins, Georgia, arriving two days early to get set up and to enable a full day of rehearsals before the April 14, 1962, season opener. The initial performance attracted a "fair matinee and there was a two-thirds house at night," *Amusement Business* reported on April 28.

Circus historian Joe Bradbury once again caught the show when it appeared in East Point, Georgia on April 16-17. He offered these comments in the May-June 1962 *Bandwagon*: "A few changes have been made since last season but essentially the show is the same. There has been a slight decrease in the number of trucks and the big top is somewhat smaller. The program presented is on par, if not stronger, than a year ago and the show has attempted to put first class production into it."

Fronting the new big top, "a new marquee is used featuring red and white striped canvas with the show's title stenciled in blue. . . . The combination sideshow-menagerie top is the one made new for King Bros. in 1960 and is entering its third season of use. . . . The one grease joint and four small concession tops also use red and white striped canvas." (When Leaf later delivered a replacement sideshow top—a three-pole, push-pole type with 60-foot rounds and two 20s, cotton thread once again was used to piece together the canvas sections.)

The 1963 Cristiani-Wallace midway showing the Killer Monster show and two concession joints. Pfening Archives.





Cristiani-Wallace on the lot before matinee in 1963. Pony sweep on far left, Milt Robbins's sideshow next to it, and Killer Monster show on right side of midway. Pfening Archives.

Carl Tyler continued his duties as side show manager and big top announcer during the first months of the tour. Frenchie LeBoeuf came aboard to direct a six-piece band for the big-top performance, and Jelly Roll Morton's four-member band was featured in the annex. Miss Eva, the hippo, and a large chimp continued to be housed in the two cage wagons which also bore the fold-out panels for the banner line. Side show ducats went for 50 cents.

General admission to the big show was \$1.90 for adults and \$1 for kids. Reserved seats were an extra 90 cents.

Bradbury was impressed particularly by Cristiani-Wallace's adherence to the old-fashion circus format, with plenty of horses, three elephants, pretty girls and buffoons, and "the finest program of traditional circus marches, gallops and waltzes it has been this reporter's pleasure to hear in 15 years. . . .

"Norma Cristiani, wife of the owner, has directed the aerial web and ladder numbers using 10 young ladies, who are very well costumed. . . . Their performance is reminiscent of the Corporation shows of the '20s when Hagenbeck-Wallace, John Robinson, and Sells-Floto used to have a ballet corps of young ladies that appeared in the various specs, aerial and equestrian numbers."

The performance lacked the usual opening walk-around of performers and animals. In its place were six showgirls mounted on matched black and white horses and carrying the American flag opened the show, with the band playing "God Bless America." Also missing for the first time, Bradbury wrote, were the wild west concert and candy pitch.

The three bulls—Lois, Sheeba and Susie—were worked before appreciative crowds by Iris Hill and Steve Fanning. Eddie Frisco's comedy car bit also drew rave reviews.

Cristiani-less Show?

Back for a second consecutive tour were the little Cristianis, who provided a riding act, principal routine, tumbling and elephant leaps. The Flying Padillos were the featured aerial act for much of the season.

"Pete's Cristiani Bros. Show Is Almost 'Cristiani-less'" was the headline of Bill Hall's review in the May-June 1962 *White Tops*. Based on his taking in a May 19 Cristiani-Wallace performance at Levittown, Pennsylvania, Hall was critical that "the show offers only a small handful of Cristianis—and a small handful at that."

Had he had seen the show only three days earlier, he would have been able to count additional members of the Cristiani family in the three rings. Pete recently explained that some of his brothers and sisters had been booked for other spot dates prior to and during early-season stands of Cristiani-Wallace. Freddie and Ortans Cristiani-Canestrelli's rola-bola routine and Oscar Cristiani's elephants—along with William "Buckles" Woodcock's bulls and the former Norma Cristiani herd—were featured attractions at the Sells & Gray-King Bros. circus at New Jersey's Palisades Park during an April 20-29 run. And wild animal trainer Eddie Kuhn was committed to a series of Hamid-Morton dates prior to rejoining Cristiani-Wallace. Pete said his brother Daviso also joined his show for brief stints between other engagements.

The ever-changing and improved line-up was reflected in Irwin Kirby's July 14 review for *Amusement Business*. After spending May 19-20 on the Cristiani-Wallace lot in Reading, Pennsylvania, Kirby noted Kuhn's big cats were on the show, and "three more elephants were expected any day. Inside the white top the performance moved more smoothly than its 1961 version. . . .

"Manager Pete Cristiani was fitting out a new horse van with livery racks. Business had been on the upswing with very few disappointments among recent dates. . . . As much as anything, the casual visitor took away an impression of neat equipment and an efficient face presented to the public."

As listed in the *Amusement Business* account, Cristiani's staff of tested show veterans included: J. J. Plunkett (Corky Plunkett's brother), legal adjuster; Harry Hammond and Billie Plunkett (Norma Cristiani's half-sister), secretaries; Neil Berk, general agent; Paul Pyle, superintendent and boss canvasman; Murray Whited, concessions; Norma Cristiani, front door; Lillian Sadowski, inside entrance; Carl Tyler, announcer; Pete Sadowski and Eddie Frisco, transportation; Thelma Kelly, wardrobe; Felix Morales, prop boss; Doc Copare, cookhouse; Louis Dietrick, pit show; Carl Tyler, side show; Herbert Farrington, concession assistant; Frenchie LeBoeuf, band leader; Steve Fanning, elephant boss; Duke Jensen, stock boss.

Upward, Onward to Canada

Pete's circus didn't return to Philadelphia in 1962. But Cristiani-Wallace secured a two-day engagement in Baltimore and scored in several Baltimore-Washington suburbs before hitting traditional Cristiani towns in Maryland, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Moving rapidly through New England, the outfit turned in two performances at Calais, Maine, on June 9. Two days later the show be-

gan a month-long swing through Canada, making St. John, New Brunswick, its first stop. Pete's show replayed former Cristiani Bros. cities as Halifax and Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, and Riviere du Loup, Quebec. Circus fans in Ottawa, the Commonwealth's capital, turned out for the troupers on July 3 and 4. Guelph, Ontario, was the final Canadian date on July 10.

Cristiani switched from American to Canadian promoters after the initial dates in the Dominion provided lackluster turnout. Women staffed many of the phone rooms. "I didn't do as well as my brothers did, but I still did good business," Pete recalled during a recent interview. "Phone promotions in Canada weren't as good. They just didn't respond as well as they did [previously]." Despite lower grosses overall, Pete said his show was able to turn a profit north of the border because Cristiani-Wallace had "a much smaller nut than my brothers."

Re-entering the U.S. at Tonawanda, New York, for shows on July 11, the circus spent a month in the Empire State and in Pennsylvania before pitching its tents in the Western Massachusetts towns of Pittsfield and Northampton, on August 13 and 17, respectively. There, ticket office worker Laverne Allen paid attention to an enthusiastic, 14-year-old circus buff, Richard Flint, who would return to Pittsfield in 1984 for a CHS convention as the group's president. (See sidebar following this story.)

A somber observance highlighted the show's August 31 stand in Milford, Connecticut, where the ashes of famed elephant trainer Louis Reed, who had died in late May, were scattered over the lot. According to a September 15 *Amusement Business* report, "Reed had built a life-long friendship with Ben Davenport and had requested his ashes be scattered over any show owned by Ben. Norma, Ben's daughter, is married to show owner Pete Cristiani. The action was requested by Reed's widow, Adele Nelson Reed. She attended both performances that day."

Pete's Just Mad About Harry

An early-season billing paper snafu plagued the outfit for much of the remainder of the 1962 tour. The toxic outcome of what should have been a normal delivery by Enquirer Printing forever soured relations between Pete and Harry Anderson, the Cincinnati printing company's owner. (In addition to the Cristiani show, Anderson also supplied paper for the Beatty, Sells & Gray, King, and Hoxie shows.) During a 2011 interview at his Sarasota home, here's how the 86-year-old trouper remembered the confrontation: "We were going into Nyack, I believe (for a May 28 stand), and the paper was supposed to be there for 30 days. So Elmer Kaufman called me. . . . He said, 'Pete I'm stuck [in another town] with the crew. We have no paper.'"

Pete hurriedly contacted Anderson, who was unaware of the mix-up and promised to investigate. "So I waited 30, 45 minutes and called him back. And Harry didn't know what happened.

"I said, 'There's something wrong here.' And I got a hold of Central Show Printing in [Mason City] Iowa—they'd done business with my brothers for quite a while. I gave them the dates and the towns for the stock and streamers. The manager was very sympathetic. He said, 'I'll keep the crews on overnight. We can do the job in two days.' He told me it was going to cost a lot of money. I said, 'Well, it's going to cost me a lot of money to keep these nine men—the bill crew; I've got to pay them.'" By working overtime, Central Printing was able to get a rush supply in the billing crew's hands.

Altogether, Pete said the billing crew had no paper for about ten days but that it was still costing him \$2,800 a week for the idled operation. To compensate for the absence of Cristiani-Wallace pro-



Pete and Norma Cristiani at the banquet of the Circus Fans Association convention in 1963. Don Smith photo, Pfening Archives.

motion on billboards and posters in the affected towns, Cristiani increased newspaper and radio advertising and sent in a few extra clowns ahead to promote the show.

"Now about a week later, Harry Anderson sends the police out to get a hold of me. See, that's the way [suppliers] would contact us. So I went up, and Harry tells me, 'I've got your paper.' And I said, 'I don't need your paper, Harry. Central Show Printing printed the paper for me, and I'm completely ordered for 30 days.'"

"He said, 'Well, I already shipped it this morning.' I said, 'What good does it do me? You're 30 days behind on the dates.'"

"To make a long story short, I stayed with Central Show Printing for the rest of the season.

"And we're going down through Georgia, coming home. We were at Jessup on Saturday (September 30). And that—can I swear? [Yes]—that goddamn Harry Anderson got a lawyer and attached the show. He's suing me for \$25,000 in lost business. So Jessup was a crooked town, anyway; the worst town. And I'll tell you who gave him the name of the town: Floyd King!

"Floyd was tipping off Harry because he was a good friend of Harry's. See, the Beatty show did business with the Enquirer Printing Company for years. So Floyd (Beatty-Cole general agent) told Harry, 'If you want to attach somebody, go to Georgia and get them, because they can't get loose for 10 days.'"

"I wasn't mad at Floyd King about it. But somebody tipped them off as to which trucks to take. They grabbed my concession wagon, which had the office in front; my generators, and, I think, the pole wagon. So now I'm paralyzed.

"I got that equipment loose because they filed suit against the Sarasota Operating Company that operated the circus, but the Globe Equipment Company owned the trucks.

"So now [Enquirer Printing] has a judgment against me. Harry Anderson spent about \$10,000 for lawyers to try to collect \$8,000 that we owed him on paper. I called him on the phone and said, 'Harry, I thought you were smarter than that. To pull what you did, you tried to put me out of business.'"

"And I never did pay him. I was determined. To this day I never paid him."

However, Pete said he made an on-the-spot settlement in Jessup with Anderson's lawyer for \$3,500 so that the circus could move on to the next stand. He added that he and Anderson patched up

their differences when the Enquirer head later visited Pete at winter quarters. The Cincinnati firm supplied all of the show's paper for its 1963 tour.

Cristiani-Wallace completed the 1962 season on October 17 at Ocala, Florida, having covered almost 12,000 miles in the Eastern U.S. and Canada.

For all its frustrations, 1962 was the most profitable of the five years that Pete had circuses on the road. This was due, Cristiani said, to the fact that he had been able to keep the nut within a manageable \$3,500 range. He would not be so fortunate in 1963.

Spells of bad weather plagued the show at the start and conclusion, and illness waylaid Pete and Norma toward the end of the season. The assassination of the President of the United States brought a dramatically scaled-down—and renamed—version of the enterprise to an abrupt closing in late November.

Welcome Back, Family

The supreme achievement of the 1963 edition may have been the reunion of the bulk of the performing Cristiani family under the same big top. The Little Cristiani troupe, featuring Pete's sisters, Chita and Cosetta, had departed at the end of the 1962 tour; Benny and Remo went with Milton (Doc) Bartok's newly framed United Nations Circus—with Neil Berk in tow as their general agent.

There was no way that circus fans would miss the Cristiani siblings' imprint on the performance of this, the third edition of Cristiani-Wallace. Returning to the center ring were the unmistakable talents of Lucio, Oscar, Daviso, Ortans and Corky. Many of their spouses, including Ortans's husband Freddie Canestrelli, and Lucio's wife Gylđa shared the spotlight in numerous routines.

A considerable source of pride to Pete and Norma was the under-canvas, center-ring debut of their nine-year-old daughter, Eva, who presented managē on her horse Royal. Eva was billed in a pre-season *Amusement Business* ad as "the world's youngest equestrienne." At Pete's request, Capt. William Heyer broke the act for Eva at his home in Sarasota. Her younger sister Desire would take to the ring a dozen years later. Pete also had a number of nieces and nephews either performing or working on his 1962 show. This was truly the high-water mark of the Cristiani-Wallace Bros. Circus.

Joe Bradbury heaped praise on the enterprise in his May-June *Bandwagon* review. "The circus greatly resembles the old Cristiani Bros. Circus of 1956-60 which was one of the all-time favorites of the fans."

Pete and Norma's nine-year-old daughter Eva made her debut on Cristiani-Wallace in 1963 with her horse Royal, trained by the great Capt. William Heyer. Don Smith photo, Pfening Archives.



Pete reshuffled not only the performance roster but also the route and key staff positions. With Paul Cristiani in charge of routing, the advance was beefed up considerably. His principals included contracting agents Frank Peters and William Findley; James Ray, contracting press agent; Walter Stebbins and Forrest Freeland, press story men, and Carla Jones, press and TV. Elmer Kauffman returned as manager of a seven-man billing crew.

Without a doubt, Cristiani family members influenced most aspects of the circus's day-to-day operations, both underneath and outside the big top.

Although Norma Cristiani maintained her responsibility of overseeing the performance—especially the costuming and aerial displays, Lucio took on an increased role in shaping and enhancing the ground acts.

With Oscar Cristiani being named elephant superintendent, Steve Fanning and Irish Hill left to join up with a new entry, Von Bros. This small, three-ring trucker was fielded by Henry Vonderheid in partnership with Buck Steele. Von Bros. would loom large in Pete Cristiani's future trekking on the tanbark trail.

And as Paul Pyle continued his duties as superintendent and boss canvasman, Daviso took on added operational responsibilities.

Pete, of course, kept an iron grip on concessions, which were vital to the organization's cash flow. With Murray Whited in charge of midway and big-top flash, Cristiani was able to focus more on overall operations. In 1963, however, cold and rainy weather during the opening and closing weeks of the tour kept many circus goers from reaching into their billfolds and purses to buy snow cones and Cokes, Cristiani said. Bad weather also deterred many parents from taking their youngsters to the showgrounds.

Hollywood to Hialeah

Prior to the normal spring kickoff, Pete's outfit kept the heat on the competition for the lucrative Florida winter dates. He clipped the number of these stands to thirteen from three dozen in 1961-1962. Cristiani-Wallace offered the full roster of acts for those engagements.

Starting on March 29 with a cluster of bookings close by the show's Riverview winter quarters—Clearwater, Tampa, Pinellas Park and Bradenton—the Cristiani-Wallace fleet stopped for two shows in Sebring before reaching the Sunshine State's southernmost climes. In blitzkrieg fashion, the outfit moved rapidly through Hollywood, South Hialeah, South Miami and Key West—all familiar Cristiani Bros. dates. Lengthy jumps took the show up the Atlantic coast to West Palm Beach and Cocoa and finally to Gainesville on April 10.

Two days later, and another 288 miles northward, Cristiani-Wallace setup at Thomaston, Georgia, for two performances. On April 13 the show returned to Warner Robins, followed by a two-day engagement in the Atlanta suburb of Mabelton.

Again, scribe Bradbury was on hand at the latter two stands. "The show is practically the same size as last season and travels on approximately the same number of vehicles," he noted, "but the color flash presented by the trucks and other properties this year is the best in the show's history."

A new marquee bearing the Cristiani-Wallace title graced the entrance to the big top, a new front sidewall gave the sideshow a fresh look, and most show-owned vehicles had been repainted with a new color scheme—the semis painted white on top and blue on bottom—and the hyphenated title. "Even the seat trucks are numbered in blue and titled in yellow this year. . . ."

"The old Wallace Bros. paper has been used up and the full Cristiani-Wallace title now appears on all the very colorful stock paper. . . ."

Bradbury described the outdoor billing as "moderate" and reported extensive use of lithos and window cards in downtown Atlanta.

Trombone player Howard Stratton was the band leader, backed by seven other musicians: Charles Moyer, first trumpet; Bob Grove, second trumpet; Henry Diaz, third trumpet; Bill Tobias, first trombone; Walt Peale, baritone; Owen Rank, bass, and Maurice Castleman, drums. Moyer later succeeded Stratton, who was sidelined by heart troubles, Cristiani said.

Youthful Troupers

The original Cristiani siblings generously populated the performance, but many family acts incorporated a younger generation of kinkers.

Even lacking a big cat cage routine as the opener and a human cannonball for the blow-off, the hour-and-a-half performance provided a whirlwind of action, with a new announcer, Dave Dorlock, at the mike.

Bookending the show were Freddie Canestrelli and his three youngsters—the Chesterfield Troupe—on trampoline and the Flying Padillos.

Newcomer Napoleon Zamperla was featured on bounding rope and, with his family, in a unicycle turn. Zamperla also was a member of "The Incomparable Cristiani Riding Troupe." But this much-heralded act was built around Lucio, "the greatest riding comedian of all times." Other Cristiani riders listed in the program were Lucio's wife Gylda, Jane and Carmen. (Pete said the Zamperlas didn't last the season.)

In addition to showcasing three rings of single elephants, Oscar Cristiani presented a foursome in the center ring. Reviewer Bradbury counted six bulls, all Indian females, on the show: Shirley, Dumbo, Susie, Carrie, Babe and Emma. Missing from the previous year's herd were Lois and Sheeba, which Remo Cristiani took with him to the United Nations circus.

Judy Ann Miller and Duke Jenson showed off high-jumping horses. Mesha Zhevov, a.k.a. Patricia Wyatt, who was trained at winter quarters by Norma Cristiani, was the featured aerial ballerina. Miss Eva the hippo and Capt. Eagles were back with their hippodrome stroll. Clown alley consisted of five merry-makers.

At the Atlanta suburban showing, the kids' tickets remained at the previous year's level—one dollar. But adult general admission ducats and reserved seating were reduced to \$1.50 and 75 cents respectively. "In larger towns I went up to \$2.50 for the blues," Pete said.

Hart to Heart

Sideshow tickets continued at 50 cents. But there was considerable turnover in the annex. Clarence Smith and his Dixieland Minstrels of three bandmen and two dancers replaced Jelly Roll Morton, who took his group to the Von Bros. sideshow. And Milt Robbins's illness early in the season led to Pete's hiring Tommy Hart as sideshow manager. Charlie Roark also came over with his Punch and Judy routine. Hart later blew the show, but it was not due to money or working conditions.

"It was strange," Pete commented. "It was over a young girl that Tommy found who joined up. I don't know where he found her. Met her in a bar or something. Pretty good looking girl. He put her in the sword box act—Serpentina.

"Tommy Hart liked to drink, which was his business. But when



The Cristiani-Wallace midway at a good matinee in 1963. Sideshow bannerline on left. Pete can just barely be seen handling the exchange pass booth in front of the marquee. Fred D. Pfening, Jr. photo, Pfening Archives.

he'd get through at night, he'd always have a smorgasbord—he was a big eater, too—in his trailer. And so he'd invite people over. He liked my nephew, Reo—Davis's son. Reo was a good looking kid. That was Tommy's mistake; he should have never invited Reo over for sandwiches and drinks.

"But pretty soon Serpentina was sneaking out, meeting my nephew. So Tommy lost her. He got mad at me and said, 'You've got to send your nephew back to college.' I said [and Pete was laughing as he related the jackpot], 'He's graduated from college, and he wants to stay on the road with me.'

"So for one reason or the other, Tommy Hart never showed up in the next town. He just quit. That's when Milt Robbins came up from Florida and started running the sideshow for me."

A midway diner mounted on a straight job truck replaced the separate cook tent of previous seasons. Henry Gray and his wife served circus patrons on the side facing the midway, and an awning extended over a half dozen tables on the back side where Cristiani-Wallace personnel took their meals. However, Pete chuckled, "Henry and his wife had a drinking problem, and sometimes they weren't sober enough to fry eggs."

Sword swallower Francis Durant substituted for the indisposed couple, "but they cooked better than Frankie." Occasionally the Grays remained out of action for two weeks or more.

Sponsors Payoff

Cristiani designated office manager Robert Brown to handle the morning settlement with each sponsoring organization until he was felled by an eye condition requiring surgery.

"We never worked the guarantee contract, which I think was a mistake," Cristiani admitted. "But it was tough to get a guaranteed contract, to be honest with you, in those days. You could get a sponsor if they saw that they didn't have any risk. But the sponsors were



Jane Cristiani hands Gylda Cristiani, Lucio's wife, a hoop, during the riding act in 1963. Don Smith photo, Pfening Archives.

responsible for getting the lot. Our advance men—the promoters who were ahead of the show a couple of months—would look at it.”

While acknowledging that some of those lots were dicey, Cristiani also pointed out that “sometimes we got some real good ones that you wouldn’t be able to get without a sponsor—the parking lot of a shopping center or ballpark. All we had to do was put up a deposit to assure that the lot was returned as much as possible to its former condition.” In addition, the local organization also was on the hook for liability insurance. And, because the local sponsor was responsible for providing security, “the show had fewer problems” with rowdies or disgruntled circus goers.

Pete elaborated on the terms of his show’s contact. “If the sponsor did collecting on the sales that were made by phone, they got 30 per cent. If they didn’t do the collecting, they got 20 percent [of advance sales]. The promoter got 35 percent, and the show got 40 or 45.”

In addition, “the sponsors got 10 percent of general admission sales. If they sold more than \$2,000 worth of adult tickets, they would get 20 percent. It was on scale, you know. But very seldom did they sell many tickets. That was a problem with a lot of our sponsors; they didn’t want to do any work. They depended on the promoters to sell the tickets.

“But I found that when Norma and I had the show some of the sponsors had a [pet] project. And if they didn’t reach that amount, we used to give them a couple hundred dollars if that was what they were short.”

Circus of the Year

Cristiani-Wallace was designated 1963 Circus of the Year by the Circus Fans of America, which held its annual convention in Reading, Pennsylvania. Approximately 200 CFA registrants attended two performances while the circus was set up there on June 15-16. As reported in the July 6 *Amusement Business*, “Cristiani-Wallace business has been good through Pennsylvania. York drew a big stand, and in Reading for the CFA Convention and the Sertoma Club’s 9th annual circus presentation, three full houses were notched for the two-day stand.”

That same edition carried a piece of bad news. On June 20, the 20-year old Mesha Zhebos “fell 25 feet from the loop-the-loop trapeze at Hazelton, Pa., before an audience estimated by circus agent Jim Raab at 1,200.” The showgirl suffered a broken hip, damage to her pelvis and a broken jaw. “Thirty-two stitches were made. Her overall condition, however was listed as ‘fair.’”

The final sentence of the article disclosed that “Paul and Jane Cristiani have closed.”

Cristiani-Wallace enjoyed an extended run through Ohio and Michigan before dipping back down through the South for one-day stands in South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama. After three engagements in the Florida Panhandle, the threat of Hurricane Cindy in the Gulf of Mexico brought the regular season to a premature close on September 14. The show had traveled just under 10,000 miles.

Dailey Double

But Pete wasn’t through for the year. Using his two-year-old big top with only a single middle section, he assembled a one-ring version, under the Dailey Bros. title, for a second swing through the Sunshine State. Because of illness, Pete and Norma didn’t accompany the downsized outfit.

Instead, Pete named his brother, Belmonte, as unit manager. Pete said Belmonte had spent the season on Royal American Shows, where he had a number of rides.

After retooling at Cristiani’s winter quarters in Riverview, the outfit made a twenty-one-mile jaunt over to St. Petersburg for the October 20 opener. For this and several other dates, which had been contracted earlier, the show was promoted as Cristiani-Wallace. In St. Petersburg the all sections of the big top were erected, along with the pit show and concession stands on the midway. The side-show format was dramatically altered. It now was a menagerie attraction. The only annex performer on this abbreviated tour was sword swallower Francis Durant, who was the front talker. The attraction utilized the same folding metal banners on the front of the two cage wagons, and patrons still paid four bits to walk through the marquee between the semis. Inside, an awning extended over the rhino, hippo and other cage animals.

The first outing was a hit. As the October 21 *St. Petersburg Times* reported, “Approximately 8,400 attended performances yesterday of the Cristiani-Wallace Bros. Circus at Joe’s Creek Industrial Park, sponsored by the Sunshine Kiwanis Club.” Pete said concerns by the fire department about the larger-than-expected turnout caused the addition of a third performance.

There were a number of new faces on this fall tour, including Col. Calvin Miller as ringmaster, the Rojas family of jugglers, and the Remos Loyal Troupe.

According to the newspaper’s after-report, “Col. Miller . . . told an interesting story of circus history involving the show. Two families, the Cristianis and the Loyals, are considered the best in horse-back riding acts. An intense rivalry existed between them. Then Ramon Loyal married a Cristiani [Erwide, one of Pete’s cousins]—

and yesterday he performed in the Cristiani circus as a tightrope walker."

The Cristiani riding act with Lucio as the featured performer was now being introduced as "the Francescos." And Oscar Cristiani presented "the fastest moving elephant act in history." Other animal acts included Pete and Norma's daughter Eva on manage; Norma's Chimpanzees, presented by Judy Miller, and Harry Eagles and the popular hippo walk-around.

Among other routines which had appeared on the regular season tour were the Vasquez troupe on horizontal bars and Bill Brickle's dog routine. Brickle was the show's mail agent.

Amusement Business also listed these acts: Dave De Lock and Hugo Zuniga families, juggling; Miss Anita (Fornasari), foot juggling; Bob McQuin, goats; De Lock's dogs; Zunigas, trampoline; liberty act; Eddie Frisco and his hot rod; elephants, and a riding act. The after-show touted Dave De Lock and wife Cindy presenting whips, knife-throwing, fast draw, riding and sharpshooting.

Most dates for the 90-minute performance apparently were promoted under the Dailey title. At Ocala, on October 29, for example, it was advertised as Dailey Bros. Circus and was set up on the parking lot of Frazier's Discount House on U.S. 441. Pete said the show arranged tie-in with the store owner to provide discounted tickets as a means of attracting more customers to the business. As a result, a Wallace Bros. ad accompanying the circus press release in the October 27 *Ocala Star-Banner*, promoted a one-dollar admission charge—"One price to all. Everyone goes on child's ticket."

Proceeds were to benefit Ocala Moose Lodge projects. In addition, it was reported "Moose members are also making it possible for those at the Florida School for Girls to attend."

"Outstanding performances by the Christiani (sic) Troupe and others are promised in acts featuring Liberty horses and other equestrian stars," stated the Ocala article. "More important to any circus are the antics of assorted clowns and Dailey's has some of the best in the business, promoters declared. They are led by Italo Fornasari, who says clowns fill the same place in the circus program as cartoons and comic strips in the newspapers."

Pete said Frank McCloskey spent two hours visiting the circus in Orlando on November 16, four days after the Beatty-Cole show closed its season there.

Tragedy Overrides Tour

The downsized show ground to an unanticipated halt at Boca Raton on Friday, November 22, five days short of its intended closing.

A shocked nation remained glued to TV sets and radios at the announcement that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas at 1:30 p.m. Eastern time. Pete recalled that after being informed by Belmonte that only 20 people turned out for the 4:00 p.m. performance and about a dozen for the 8:00 o'clock show, he pulled the plug on Dailey Bros. and ordered the fleet back to Riverview.

Ironically, *Amusement Business's* vague report on the show's doings may have been overlooked by many circus people because the story was published on that same Friday, November 22. "Starting its first season while most circuses are heading for the barn, Dailey Bros. debuted in St. Petersburg, Fla. . . and has been traveling the Sunshine State for the past month. Ownership and backing are not definite, but the phone number and box number were listed for Paul Cristiani. . . and several Cristianis are reportedly on the show."

The two truncated tours in 1962 had been the least productive of the three under Pete's ownership. Having promoted the one-

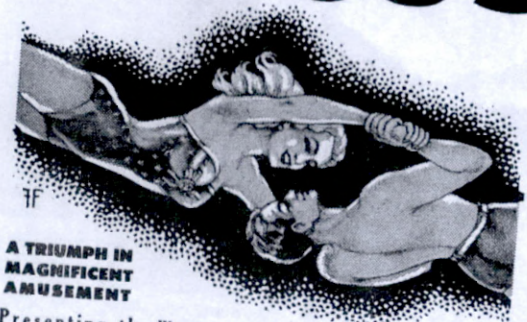
ring format with some success, Cristiani made plans to implement further and more radical changes to his outfit in the coming year.

The author is indebted to John Polacsek for his heroic efforts in recreating the route lists for Wallace Bros., Cristiani-Wallace and Dailey Bros. tours; to Vickie Cristiani Rossi for permission to quote from her 2007 memoir, *Spangles, Elephants and Me*, and for contributing additional valuable insights and information; to Richard Flint for sharing personal memories and photos of his 1962 visits to the Cristiani-Wallace epic; to David Hammerstrom, author of a new book, *Inside the Changing Circus*, for permission to reproduce portions of his *Showbiz David* blog entry on his brief stint as a Wallace Bros. joey in 1961; and to Fred Pfening III, and to his late father, Fred Pfening Jr., for their patience in dealing with the oft-delayed dispatches of this writer.

Next: Dailey Bros. goes out as a shopping center free attraction, featuring open-air circus acts and carnival rides. The final account in this series also will detail Pete's revival of Cristiani-Wallace and his later escapades as a circus and carnival concessionaire, entertainment director for a mob-connected Las Vegas casino, and the framer of Dick Garden's trouble-prone Toby Tyler Circus. **BW**

Ad for Cristiani-Wallace Circus in January 26, 1963 issue of *Amusement Business*. Pfening Archives.

CRISTIANI-WALLACE BROS. CIRCUS



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MAGNIFICENT
AMUSEMENT

Presenting the World's Foremost Big-Top Marvels
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RECOMMENDED BY A MULTITUDE OF SPONSORS
Presenting a Grand Galaxy of the World's Greatest Stars
Peerless Capt. KUHN'S CAGE OF FURY
Mastering Ferocious Lions and Tigers
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CRISTIANI FAMILY
THE GREATEST BAREBACK RIDERS OF ALL TIME
FRED and ORTANS
CANESTRELLI
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THE GREATEST ARRAY OF PERFORMING THORBRED
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CRISTIANI-WALLACE BROS. CIRCUS
BOX 567, RIVERVIEW, FLA.—210 S. FRANKLIN ST., TAMPA—Phone 577-1432

Our Man Flint Dined with Ortans, Eyed Big Cat Cages on Pete's Show

By Richard Flint

As a young circus fan just entering his teens, Cristiani-Wallace in 1962 was the first show where I spent an entire day on the lot and got to meet and talk with many show people. The souvenirs given to me, the pictures I took, and the memories of the welcome I received still have special meaning for me.

I was bitten by the circus bug by 1960 when I first subscribed to *Bandwagon* and within another year or two I subscribed to *Amusement Business*, the successor to the venerable *Billboard*. From the route listings in *Amusement Business* I must have learned that Cristiani-Wallace was coming into my home state of Massachusetts, though not especially close to my hometown. I was still a couple of years away from having a driver's license, however, and so would be dependent on one of my parents to take me.

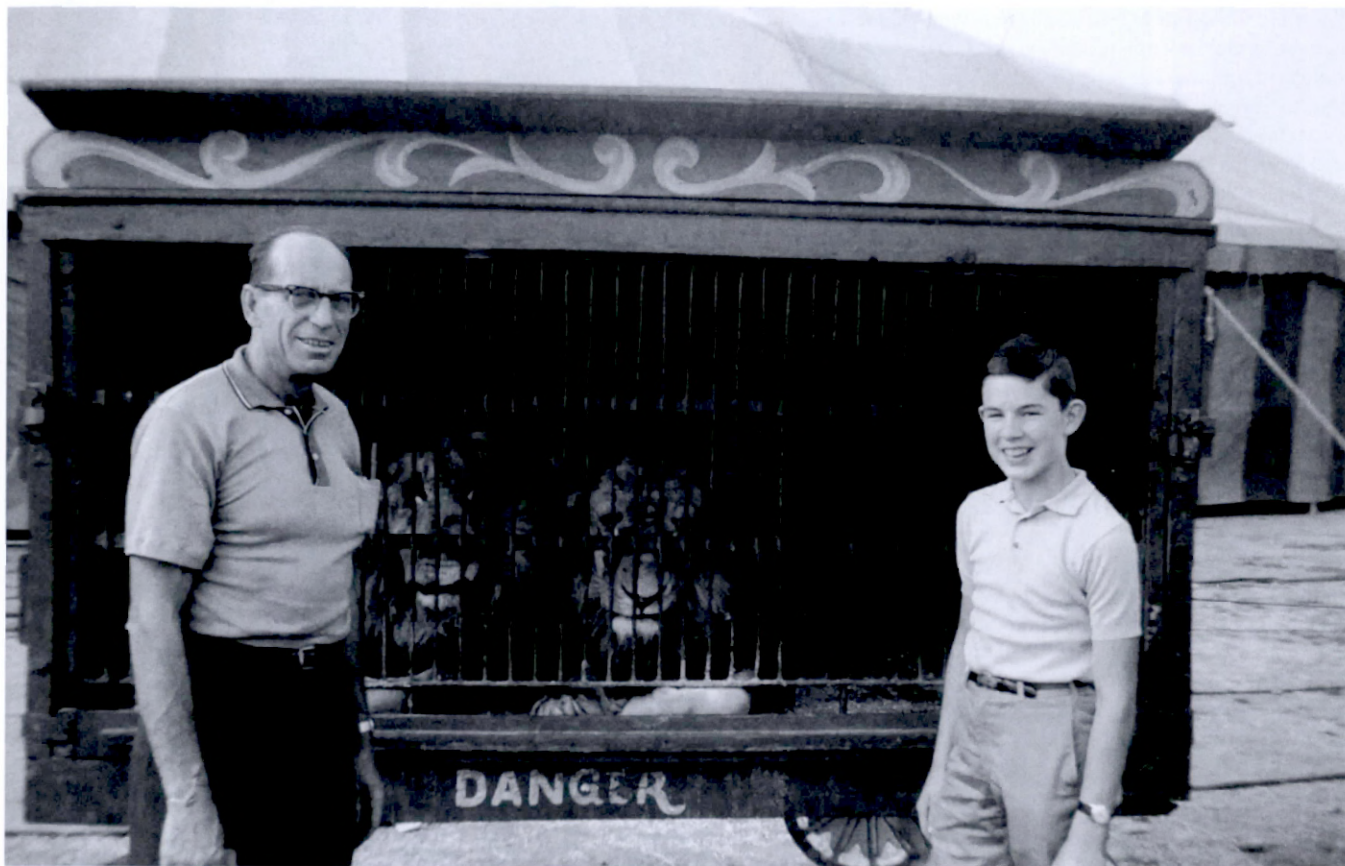
Once a month my father made a trip from our home near Springfield to Bennington, Vermont, where he had a second business and would confer with his partner there. It was a two-hour trip and the halfway mark was Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where Cristiani-Wallace Bros. would be on Monday, August 13, 1962. My dad was amenable to the idea of making his trip on that date and so I went

along with camera in hand. I only knew the town and not the lot so we looked for posters as we entered Pittsfield. The show grounds were advertised as Wahconah Park, an old and well-known location to which locals easily directed us. We must have arrived about 8:30 in the morning as the big top was spread on the ground and an elephant was ready to pull the peaks halfway up the poles. I am still surprised that my father was willing to leave his fourteen year old son on a hardscrabble circus lot far from home in a city where I knew no one as he continued for yet another hour's drive to his factory in Vermont.

While this was the fourth tent show I had seen since my father had succumbed to a boiler room call to buy Mills Bros. circus tickets in 1960, it was the first time I had a camera and was on the lot early enough to see the set-up. There were a goodly number of town kids and neighbors on the lot and a group of youngsters carried chairs that morning to earn a free ticket. My interest, however, was in the freedom to walk around and to get photos of all that was going on. I am sure my presence stood out to all those with the show.

I remember admiring the four small cages Eddy Kuhn used to house his big cats and which simulated the classic style of big rail show cage wagons. After all, having received *Bandwagon* for the previous two years with its almost reverential treatment of old wagons, I could only respect Kuhn's resurrection of an earlier time! Somehow, I got to talk with Kuhn and I recall him telling me there once were six such wagons, one of which had become a storage box on the single body flatbed that carried his arena cage and props.

Eddy Kuhn and fourteen year old Dick Flint pose in front of two of Kuhn's charges in one of the old-timey cages in which he kept his cats. Pittsfield, Massachusetts, August 13, 1962. Richard Flint photo.





Hugo Zacchini cannon featuring Barbara Zacchini as Miss X-1, a play on the name of the first aircraft to break the sound barrier, on Cristiani-Wallace, Pittsfield, Massachusetts, August 13, 1962. Richard Flint photo.

Later that day he gave me some souvenirs from his act—an old handle from a whip he had used as well as a deeply clawed and broken chair leg—and I got my picture taken with him as we stood in front of one of his antique-style cages housing two manned lions. His was a mixed fighting-style act with a few noisy gunshots to awaken some lazy lions. Kuhn's is the only mixed wild animal act I've ever seen that also included a bear, once not so unusual a feature.

Chuck Elwell, a Vermont circus fan, was spending a week's vacation on the show with his friend, veteran elephant boss Steve Fanning. This may have been the first time I met Chuck but on another of my father's monthly trips to Bennington (where Chuck happened to live), I spent the day visiting in his circus room and left with a stack of circus books and programs that were duplicates he had from a deceased Pittsfield fan. Chuck was every bit an elephant handler that week in a vacation that he forever remembered. He even presented in the ring though I recall him later telling me he really didn't have to do anything as the elephants knew exactly what to do.

Sometime during that momentary morning lull between set-up and when the first side show opening was made, I approached the ticket office and introduced myself as a circus fan and asked for a letterhead or any other souvenir they might have for a collector. I never could remember her name but there was a very kind and tolerant lady in the office who presented me with a nice packet of sample tickets (including a complimentary pass marked "void") and the Roland Butler designed letterhead as well as route cards, etc. Such acts of generosity have long been remembered and I was delighted to later learn from Pete Cristiani through Lane Talburt the name of this lady was Laverne Allen, a friend of the Davenport family from Quincy, Illinois.

If my presence as a circus fan was not known to all by show time, I am sure it was by the end of the matinee. I must have darted between the show and the backyard judging

from my photos of both. I was tolerated in front of the bandstand as I took photos from near that location though the results remain unimpressive. But it was an important training day in circus photography for me and a more advanced camera the next year, greatly helped my learning curve.

After the matinee Ortans Cristiani Canestrelli, wife of Freddie, saw me still wandering on the lot and invited me to their trailer for a meal (as I recall, they did a rola-bola act). She had made plenty of pasta and I remember a plate heaped like a mountain—I swear higher than was the plate wide! I wasn't much of a big eater as a kid so all that I really remember of this act of kindness and friendship was how would I ever eat enough to seem polite! I never saw Ortans or Freddie again but I am forever grateful for their kindness. In hindsight, however, I am pleased as can be to say that I had some legendary Cristiani pasta!

As evening approached, my dad returned to pick me up for the hour-drive home. But it was not without some stops along the way as I spied a number of billing hits in store windows. Best of all was a car dealership whose huge plate glass windows were a prime hit for the billing crew. After all, the evening show was about to begin and so no one would have further use of the numerous one-sheets and half-sheet panels that adorned the glass front of the dealership. I had some use for them and they remain in my collection to this day.

As soon as I got home, elated by the grand day, I must have promoted a repeat visit since the route card I had in hand listed another town somewhat near where I lived. And so my mother drove me to the LaFleur Airport lot in Northampton on August 16 and I enjoyed another great day on Cristiani-Wallace. It was a busy day as I recall because Oscar Cristiani with his elephants had now joined and Bucky Steele pulled on the lot with his bear act, whether to join or lay over I do not know. This was the first time I ever caught a show twice the same season but it was a pattern that has been repeated again and again during the last fifty years. Other visits to shows have blurred a bit into one joyous lifetime hobby but those two special days during the summer of 1962 remain vivid thanks to my parents and many folks on Cristiani-Wallace. **BW**

The two trailers containing fold out panels that comprised the sideshow bannerline. Trailer in front housed a large chimp and the one in back Miss Eva the hippo. The sideshow marquee was raised between the trailers, both of which came from the Dailey Bros. Circus. Sideshow boss canvasman Tommy Armstrong is on top of the chimp trailer, readying it for later in the day. Pittsfield, Massachusetts, August 13, 1962. Richard Flint photo.



Stars of the Big Top

by Robert J. Devenney

This and the next two articles provide insight into the life and death of Alfredo Codona, who combined technical virtuosity and stylistic brilliance to become arguably the greatest flying trapeze artist in history. No less a talent than Arthur Concello, whose flying ability almost matched Codona's, praised him thusly: "He couldn't look bad. If Alfredo had been run over by a truck, he'd have done it so gracefully that your first instinct might have been to applaud."

The following brief introduction to Codona's life is an abridged version of a short biography that appeared in the June 1947 issue of Muscle Power, a weight lifting and physical fitness publication. Robert J. Devenney, a member of the Circus Historical Society in the 1940s, was a frequent contributor to the magazine, often writing about circus performers.

While all three Codona pieces have been previously published, they are not widely available to today's circus history community, and for that reason they are being rerun. While they all overlap to a small degree, each touches on a different aspect of this tortured genius's life. Fred D. Pfening III

Child prodigies: Alfredo (left), Victoria, and Lalo Codona in the late 1890s. All illustrations from Pfening Archives.



[Alfredo] Codona was the son of Hortense and Eduardo Codona, both parents proud of an unbroken circus lineage. Eduardo owned a small circus in Mexico, and in that hot, dusty country Alfredo was born in 1892 [1893]. He grew up amidst the surroundings of a poor traveling show that never seemed quite successful. It was a family affair, with Hortense and Eduardo carrying both the performing and working and abetted by their six children: Victoria, Joe, Alfredo, Roe, Lalo, and Hortense. All the children learned the thorough rudiments of circus training early in life, but it was Alfredo who was destined for singular fame.

Alfredo made his arenic debut at the age of three. His father carried him into the ring concealed in a little carpet bag. After a few acrobatic turns Eduardo would open the carpet bag and Alfredo would leap out. He then joined his father in tumbling. Spectators always greeted the tiny artiste with much applause.

At the age of ten Alfredo was, under the skillful tutelage of his family, a clever and accomplished performer. He rode, tumbled, juggled, walked the tight and slack wire, worked the flying trapeze . . . and if this were not enough was already unraveling the mysteries of a heel-and-toe act. Eduardo would permit nothing short of perfection and all his children were preeminent in their chose line.

At the beginning of the nineteen-hundreds the Codona family came to America. Versed in every phase of circus work they appeared with various shows and in vaudeville. In 1910 the family appeared with Barnum and Bailey, then the Greatest Show on Earth. Here Alfredo and Lalo were members of the Seigrist-Silbon Troupe of aerialists.

The Seigrist-Silbon Troupe, never less than twenty in number, was such a large affair that individual attainment was impossible. Alfredo and Lalo, with a girl partner, evolved their own casting act. In 1917 and 1918 the Flying Codonas appeared with the Pulbiones Circus in Cuba. Because of its artistry and daring the act was immediately in demand by booking agents. The Codonas returned to the United States to fulfill a contract with the Sells-Floto Circus.

The Flying Codonas did the usual tricks—pirouettes, doubles and cut-a-ways, catches and returns, passing leaps, and ran the same gamut of tricks that other aerialists were doing. The Codonas, however, possessed a verve and dash that could only be described by the word colour and it was this distinguishing elan that set them apart. But it was also apparent that if the Codonas were to continue among numerous competitors wit would be necessary to present something new and startling.

The Flying Codonas in 1917 on Barnum and Bailey. Left to right, Alfredo, his wife Clara, Steve Ochs, and Lalo Codona.





The king and queen of the circus about 1929. Alfredo and wife Lillian Leitzel pose for circus fan Clint Beery.

Alfredo had long cherished the dream of a feat considered impossible. The triple somersault! This is just what the name implies: three somersaults in mid-air. . . . The youthful Codona, with his Icarian head in the clouds, determined to make the triple a daily part of his own performance. . . .

He was obsessed with the idea of performing the triple. And so to work, and for months and months he practiced, watched and [was] coached by Eduardo who knew all there was to know about casting work. After years of arduous, heartbreaking (and even injurious) attempts Alfredo accomplished the trick. Once successful . . . twice . . . three times . . . then, as the technique clicked in his brain, he succeeded in every try.

In 1920 at the Chicago Coliseum, the Flying Codonas presented Alfredo in the Triple Somersault. The triple is revolving three times, forward, in a position where the body is bent double. It must be accomplished more by instinct than by physical control. Alfredo's flyer would propel him into space *at a speed of sixty-two miles an hour!* At a given signal Alfredo would release himself and in the space of seven feet revolve three times! He broke out of his revolutions at the exact moment to be caught in the hands of his catcher. After the second revolution Codona always lost consciousness which endured until he found himself in the secure, waiting hands of Lalo. Mere words cannot express the unbelievable exploit that was Codona's.

Aerial work requires an innate timing, an infallible ability to gauge distance, a clear and composed mind, and supreme strength in arm and shoulder muscles. Watching aerialists go through their performance "with the greatest of ease" we seldom realize that their effortless grace and defiance is not effortless, nor defiant at all but the results of rigid and relentless training. Schooling covers the years from childhood to maturity and the true performer is never quite through learning. Their physical attributes are amazing and their endurance phenomenal. To present a performance with matchless oblivion of effort is the goal—a goal that almost defeats its own aim. . . .

Codona was not over average height and beside Lalo, his younger brother, he looked almost tiny. He never possessed the abnormally broad shoulders tapering to a wasp-like waist that most aerialists acquire. He was beautifully proportioned and closely approximated the Greek ideal of physical perfection. His arms were sinews of steel, and he could crack walnuts with a slight pressure of his hands.

When the first of the *Tarzan* pictures appeared, starring Johnny Weissmuller, movie goers were thrilled at Tarzan's ability to fly from tree top to tree top. The flying was thrilling because in these scenes Tarzan was Alfredo Codona. An intricate arrangement of ropes, covered to simulate jungle vines, was used. The distances were greater than those Alfredo ever encountered in circus work and his ability is still spoken of with awe and respect in Hollywood stunt men circles.

Codona wooed and won the Queen of the Circus, Lillian Leitzel. She was equally famous, a charming and attractive woman. Leitzel and Codona were the happiest people in the world of sawdust. The happiness was of short duration. Leitzel, while performing in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1931, was killed in a fall from her Roman Rings. And Alfredo Codona never seemed the same again.

That same year Mama Codona died, too. Surrounded by her children, and all the comforts they would provide, she died content. This, coming immediately upon the death of Leitzel, added to Alfredo's sorrow. And then, not long afterward, Eduardo passed away. The Codonas seemed marked for grief and suffering.

On April 29, 1933, at Madison Square Garden, Codona himself fell, injuring his shoulder muscles. In time he returned to the act. But



After Alfredo was injured in April 1933, Bert Doss took his place in the Flying Codonas. It was Doss's only season as part of the act. Left to right, Lalo Codona, Vera Bruce Codona, Bert Doss. Photo taken on Ringling-Barnum, Baraboo, Wisconsin, August 3, 1933.

then a terrible thing was revealed, tragic in its import: he could not perform the triple! His injury prevented that infinitesimal bit of coordination needed for the feat. He had lost the secret for which so many had strived—and failed. Now, he too, was just another aerialist. He brooded, became morose and unhappy. He withdrew from the act.

The Codonas were no longer a stellar attraction. Codona became equestrian director with Hagenbeck-Wallace in 1934, remaining for the following season, and then worked with the Tom Mix Circus. The Flying Codonas still appeared but Clayton Behee had replaced Alfredo. It was heartbreaking for Alfredo to watch from the ground while the Flying Codonas flew overhead in aerial tracery—without him.

In 1932 Codona married Miss Vera Bruce, the girl partner in the act. He tried again for happiness but it was not to be. Growing more and more bitter, he finally left circus life altogether. His wife followed him into retirement. Only Lalo carried on the name with Behee and Miss Rose Sullivan as the Flying Codonas.

And fate was also unkind to Lalo. He was injured too, in 1937, when the troupe was playing the Cirque Medrano in Paris. This was the last appearance of the Flying Codonas . . . a great circus family that new fame and paid dearly for that fame. **BW**

The Mad Love of Alfredo Codona

By Mrs. Annie Bruce
The Mother of the Wife He Killed

The following article appeared in the May 1938 issue of True Story, a magazine for women. It contains a few factual errors such as inserting that Alfredo Codona was the first person to catch the triple somersault or that he and Vera Bruce performed in the night performance of Ringling-Barnum hours after their wedding. Such mistakes, with one exception, have been left uncorrected. In spite of shortcomings the piece recounts the tortured last years of the brilliant flyer.

HE WAS THE KING OF THE BIG TOP. No other performer in all circus history ever received such wild applause and tremendous adoration. Women idolized him. But the one in all the world he wanted most, he couldn't have.

Wherever a circus top is raised, in every corner of the world, there is known the story of Alfredo Codona, the greatest of aerialists, and his beautiful wife and partner, Vera. It is a story told with tears in the eyes, for it is a tragic story. Yet it is a story of pity, too, and tenderness, and the terrible driving force of a passionate love that could not be restrained by reason. Handsome, romantic Alfredo Codona, whose feats in the air were such miracles of grace, of daring, of skill; whose name was included among those of the circus immortals even in his lifetime—what a tragedy he brought about through his inability to win the love he so hungered for.

Yes, they speak of what happened to Alfredo and Vera Codona with tears in their eyes, and with hearts wrung by sorrow. But who can measure the grief that I have suffered? For I was the mother of the beautiful Vera Codona, and I was a witness to a tragedy so terrible that only writers of horror fiction can conceive its like.

Today I weep and weep, and my nights are endless horrors. But what is there to do? What can one do when faced with the devastating results of uncontrolled emotion? I can only find some solace in relating this terrible, but pathetic story of Alfredo and Vera Codona and hope that everyone who reads it will realize what disaster lies in the attempt to force love from one who cannot give it.

Both Alfredo and Vera came of circus stock. My husband was bandmaster in a circus that toured the Orient, and I was a trapeze artist in the same circus when we married, having run away from my home in Australia to join it. Vera and my son Clary were born practically under canvas. Before Vera came, I worked to within six weeks of my confinement, and for a year after her birth she traveled with us, sleeping in a makeshift crib in our dressing tent. Later I took her back to Australia for an education, but when she was sixteen she joined her father and brother in the circus and took to bareback riding as naturally as other girls take to some light sport. She was a very pretty girl, with a fine figure and a courageous spirit, and soon became a featured performer. Alfredo's father and mother were both aerialists, and his father and his grandfather were also of the circus. They were Mexicans and marvelous artists.

Alfredo was the greatest of them all, probably the most famous trapeze performer that the world has known. His work was so ex-

traordinary that he became almost a legend in the circus. He was as outstanding for the grace with which he performed his feats as for the difficulty of the feats themselves. He was like a bird in the air, and his body was fit for a sculptor to model. His greatest achievement was the triple somersault, in which he turned three times in

The Three Codonas, l. to r. Lalo, Vera, and Alfredo, were the headliners at Berlin's Winter Garten theater in December 1932. Eight pages of the program were devoted to them. Germans apparently didn't like their flying trapeze catchers bald as Lalo is wearing a toupee. All illustrations from Pfening Archives.





Clara Codona, first wife of Alfredo, in 1917 while on Barnum and Bailey.

the air before reaching the catcher. He was the first aerialist to do this sensational act, and no one who learned it after him did it with the same picturesque finesse. There never was a performer like Alfredo Codona and circus people are convinced that there never will be another like him. My husband died about two years after Vera joined the circus, and then she and Clara came to America, where they played with circuses and in vaudeville. About eleven years ago Vera, Alfredo, his first wife, Clara, and Lillian Leitzel, the trapeze artist, were all with Ringling Brothers. Vera was a member of the May Wirth riding act, and doing odd bits, like riding in spec, the opening parade spectacle, and posing with the living statues group.

Leitzel was the most famous of the women trapeze performers. She was a very attractive and cultured woman, earning a high salary, and popular among social lights. She had been married and divorced, and was now admired by one of the circus executives. After Leitzel and Alfredo had been in the same circus for a little time, Leitzel became infatuated with Codona. It was no secret among the performers that Alfredo had put himself out to cause this infatuation. He had heard that the executive was fond of her and had decided, in his impulsive, grandiose Latin way, that it would be good sport to take Leitzel away from him.

That Alfredo was married did not trouble him. He and Clara were not too happy together, and quarrels between them were often heard by us. I suppose they remained married only because she was in his act, his brother Lalo being the other member, and it would have been difficult to train another girl to take her place. Soon Leitzel's infatuation changed to love. Although she was highly temperamental and imperious in the ring, she was glad to wait on Alfredo, and served him in every way she could. She even prepared meals for him, and had her maid look after his clothes.

Alfredo was dazzled by this attention. True, he, too, was a celebrity, but when he left the ring he was a performer like the rest, while Leitzel had a life outside the circus. She was received everywhere, and her name was known to a much greater public than Alfredo's.



Stationery used Alfredo Codona in August 1927 when returning the 1928 Detroit Shrine Circus contract to producer Orrin Davenport

He had begun this affair as an escapade, and that it should have turned out so seriously for Leitzel flattered his vanity immensely. He began to think of marrying her.

As for Clara, Alfredo had no scruples. She could secure a divorce. He would find means of convincing her that divorce was best for both of them.

Alfredo had a dominant personality. What he wanted he was accustomed to get. Clara should not stand in his way. Soon the divorce action was started, and in due time the Codonas were parted. In the divorce settlement it had been agreed that Clara was to receive a thousand dollars in cash and retain her place in the circus.

As soon as he was free, Alfredo married Leitzel.

Clara got the thousand dollars. But when it came to keeping her in the act, Leitzel objected. She could not bear to have the ex-wife around constantly, and in intimate association with her husband. She urged Alfredo to fire Clara and get someone else in her place.

Alfredo protested, not from consideration for Clara, but because he was unwilling to go through with the work of training a new girl.

Then Leitzel thought of Vera. She had first met my daughter when they were on the same bill at the New York Hippodrome, and now that they were together again. Leitzel had become very friendly with Vera.

"Why don't you put Vera in?" Leitzel suggested. "She's a promising girl."

Alfredo was anxious to please his bride, so he went to Vera's dressing room right then, and interviewed her.

He and Vera had, of course, seen each other, but had never spoken more than a few casual words. Codona was the big star and, since he had married Leitzel, was considered a bigger star than ever. All the newspapers were writing about the pair, and the Codona reputation was reaching new classes of people. Vera was still a little-known bareback rider.

After talking to her, and closely appraising her physique, Alfredo concluded that Leitzel was right. Vera would make a good partner for him.

"Clara is leaving the act," he said. "Would you like to join me?"

For Vera, this was an unusual opportunity. She was always scrupulously honest, and possessed an innate fairness that made her the trusted friend of all who knew her. If she had been aware of the true circumstances of Clara's leaving, she would not have considered Alfredo's offer. As it was, she was only too happy to accept the opportunity.

The next day Alfredo began training Vera. She learned fast, and before Clara realized what was going on, Vera was ready for the act and Clara had been put out, discarded as ruthlessly as she had been discarded as Alfredo's wife.



Codona and Leitzel wed in Chicago in July 1928 while the Ringling-Barnum Circus appeared there. Here the shy groom and blushing bride pose for photographer Harry Atwell as they are about to be whisked away to their wedding night rendezvous. Soon after, Lillian told her husband that his ex-wife Clara had to leave the Flying Codonas act.

Alfredo Codona was then moving in a world of which he was the center, and he could be callously indifferent to the feelings of others. He was gay, romantic, a good companion; but it was always of himself that he first thought.

The season in America had ended, and the Codona brothers and Leitzel were booked for a European tour, the tour beginning in Paris. It was in Paris that Vera made her debut with Alfredo. The "passing leap" was featured by him, and this was a dangerous act for a new performer. Vera had to fly from Lalo's hands, turn a somersault in the air, and catch the bar just vacated by Alfredo, who turned a somersault over Vera's body and caught Lalo's hands. The act went through smoothly and Vera received enthusiastic applause.

From then on, my daughter was established as a permanent member of the Flying Codonas, and in the next three years traveled all over America and Europe with Alfredo and Leitzel.

Alfredo's marriage was what might have been expected. Two such temperaments as his and Leitzel's had to clash, and sometimes Leitzel's temper got the better of her, and objects flew from her hands to Alfredo's head.

Many of these squabbles were over women, but they were not very serious, and after Leitzel calmed down, their life went on in that semi-satisfactory manner so often found among artists of their type.

Naturally, Leitzel could not sustain her original love or what she thought was love for Alfredo. It would have been difficult for any performer so famous and high strung as she to preserve love. But she was strongly attached to Alfredo, and jealous of him.

To Vera, Alfredo was sometimes very friendly and sometimes very casual. He, Leitzel and Vera usually dined together when they were away from the circus cook tent, and often went to cabarets and other places of amusement. Leitzel was fond of Vera, and Alfredo showed that he, too, was interested in her, but no more than that.

At the end of these three years of work together, the Codonas and Leitzel were in Europe. Alfredo was booked for the Berlin Winter Garden, but Leitzel had an engagement at the Valencia Musica Hall, in Copenhagen.

Leitzel was to be away for two weeks. No sooner had she left him, than Alfredo became a changed man. The first night he went into Vera's dressing room.

"After the show," he said, "we will go out. I know a lovely place for supper."

Vera was startled by his tone. There was an expression on his face she had never seen before.

"No, I don't think I'll go out tonight," she replied, trying to take his invitation casually.

"Oh, but you must," he insisted. "We can have a fine time together. I want you to go out with me."

"Some other time," Vera said, still trying to be casual. "I am tired tonight."

Alfredo put his fingers lightly on her bare shoulder. "You are very beautiful, Vera."

Then his voice changed. "This is a dangerous town for beautiful women. I want to teach you how to protect yourself."

He took out a small pistol. "Here, take this and keep it under your pillow."

Vera shrank from the weapon.

"I don't need it, Alfredo. I wouldn't know what to do with it. Take it away."

Alfredo laughed.

"A charming, naive girl! Never mind, I'll see that you are protected. No man shall touch you while I am with you."

The transition in Alfredo was amazing to Vera. She made light of his remarks that night, and hoped she would not hear them again. But the next day he again insisted on her going out with him, and this time tried to embrace her.

Vera resisted him, still trying to avoid taking his advances seriously.

But the more Vera resisted the more impetuous and insistent Alfredo became. He seemed to be much astonished that any woman he admired could refuse his advances. Women had been more than kind to Alfredo. He had never lacked partners for affairs. His magnificent body, his charming manners, his extraordinary grace, and his great fame made him irresistible.

That night, after the show, Alfredo again appeared in Vera's dressing room. "Now, Vera," he said, "you know you are going to belong to me, so why make all this fuss? Why can't we have a good time together?"

"Because that's not my way of living," Vera told him. "Besides, your wife is my friend."

"Well, why should that make a difference? You can still be her friend."

"No, Alfredo, I'm not like that. There are others. You don't have to bother with me."

He laughed. "Of course there are others. But it's you I want. I've wanted you for a long time, and now we have an opportunity."

He tried to take her in his arms. She fought him off.

"I'm not that kind of a girl!" she cried over and over again. "Let's just be friends. Don't hurt me, nor Leitzel."

"Again Leitzel," he burst out savagely. Then he recovered himself. "You're a funny girl!" He looked at her with amusement. "So pretty, and so cold!"

He left her. But Vera knew Alfredo would not give up. Leitzel would be gone for two weeks.

But the next morning a startling telegram came from Copenhagen for Alfredo.

Alfredo and Leitzel's mother, who had remained in Berlin, immediately took a plane for Copenhagen. There they discovered a dreadful accident had occurred. Leitzel had been doing her famous one-arm round; that is, turning her body around rapidly while holding on with one hand to the end of a rope fifty feet in the air. She always made a hundred turns, sometimes many more. As she was twirling around, something broke and Leitzel crashed to the

stage. Attendants ran to her and were about to carry her off, but she pushed them away and tried to walk, unable to believe that the great Leitzel could be seriously injured in a fall.

But she collapsed. Doctors were called. They pronounced her badly hurt, and had her taken at once to the hospital.

When Alfredo arrived, however, Leitzel had already improved so much that the doctors told him he could return to Berlin for that evening's performance. There were only a few minutes in which to catch a train which would bring him into Berlin in time for the show, so Alfredo left Leitzel's mother in Copenhagen, and hurried back.

Just as he stepped off the train in the Berlin station a messenger handed him a telegram: "Leitzel dead. Come back."

That was the end of the great and beautiful Lillian Leitzel. And for all her greatness she died alone, without one friend or relative at her bedside. As Leitzel suddenly grew worse, her mother became hysterical and had to be taken away to her hotel room. There was no one else in Copenhagen close enough to the broken artist to watch over her in her dying moments.

How the accident happened, no one knew. There was a scientific explanation of a fault in one of the steel parts of the rigging, but all circus people were puzzled. Every trapeze artist and aerialist carries his own rigging, and it is carefully inspected before each performance.

But what did it matter how the accident happened? The world was moved only by Leitzel's death. It was a shock for the millions who had seen and admired her. I don't believe the death of any performer, with the possible exceptions of Caruso and Rudolph Valentino, ever caused such sorrow among the public as the death of Lillian Leitzel.

Vera was stunned. She knew that at the moment Leitzel had crashed to the stage of the Valencia, Alfredo was either making love to her, or planning to win her. This realization tortured her.

Then Lalo, Alfredo's brother, came to her with a big box.

"Here are three gowns," he said. "Leitzel bought them for your birthday. She said to me, 'I won't be here, so you give them to Vera.'"

Vera's birthday was on the 19th of that month, several days later.

Leitzel's thoughtfulness made her death the more shocking to Vera, particularly since by a weird coincidence Leitzel's body was cremated on Vera's birthday.

Alfredo and Vera left Berlin, carrying Leitzel's ashes with them. A subtle change had come over Alfredo. Notwithstanding Leitzel's death, his attitude toward Vera was as ardent as before. But he was no longer merely the woman hunter. When he spoke to her, when he looked at her, there was a new tenderness in his voice and in his eyes, a new gentleness in his manner.

But Vera was so stricken by what had happened that she did not notice this change. She could think only of the poor, crushed Leitzel.

As the ship with Alfredo and Vera aboard came into New York Harbor an airplane flew over it, and dropped wreaths for Leitzel. This tribute had been arranged by some of Leitzel's admirers. Similar tributes continued along the journey to California, where Alfredo lived, and where in Inglewood Cemetery he interred Leitzel's ashes.

Today there is an imposing statue of marble over her grave, imported from Italy at a cost of ten thousand dollars, and all about it are markers placed by those who had known and loved Lillian Leitzel.

Alfredo and Vera went back to work, and directly after the interment of Leitzel's ashes, opened with Ringling Brothers circus at Madison Square Garden, New York.

Circus performers cannot permit anything to interfere with their acts. Alfredo was the same wonderful aerialist he always had been,



The reconstituted Flying Codonas featured, left to right, Alfredo Codona, Vera Bruce, and Lalo Codona. Harry Atwell photo.

and Vera was an expert partner. Under Alfredo's training and guidance, she was acquiring a reputation as one of the leading artists in her profession.

At the same time Alfredo never left her free from his attentions. He no longer forced himself on her and he did not always demand that she yield to him. He pleaded. "There is no longer Leitzel to consider," he used to say.

Vera could only repeat, "That's not my way of living."

Alfredo could not understand her. He could not understand how any woman could resist such passionate courtship from the celebrated Alfredo Codona.

"That's not my way of living!"

What kind of reply was that? Was she a little schoolgirl? Or did she stupidly want to seclude herself from life?

It was amazing.

"Vera," he would say, "I can go out and get any woman I want. And I can't get you. Why is that?"

Vera was in despair. "It's just because I don't like that kind of life. That's all I can tell you. Can't you understand?"

Alfredo couldn't understand.

Vera often wanted to leave the Flying Codonas, but when Alfredo suspected she was thinking of quitting, he became contrite and

begged her to forgive him. And when he was contrite and repentant, Alfredo was a very sympathetic person. He had most charming and ingratiating qualities.

So Vera stayed on. A year passed, two years. During this time the change that had begun in Alfredo after Leitzel died increased. As Vera consistently found it impossible to accede to Alfredo's wishes, he did begin to understand her reasons, and did begin to have an insight into her character. And with this understanding his interest in her was transformed to love.

All his life Alfredo had skimmed on the surface of emotion, and lived in a world of glitter. Now, for the first time, he felt genuine love, and into this love went all the intensity that was in the man.

To him Vera now became an ideal, a shrine at which he knelt day and night. She became to him the purity, the nobility, the grace, the beauty, the fascination that was in woman.

"I have, never loved anyone but you," he told her. "No one can ever love you as I love you. No one ever will."

In one of the letters I received from Vera at this time, she wrote, "Mother, Alfredo wants to marry me. I don't want to marry him, but he keeps pleading and pleading. He treats me beautifully, and gives me everything I want. But I don't love him. What shall I do?"

Who could advise her what to do? Only she could make the decision.

The act went on and Alfredo continued to worship Vera and beg her to make him happy by marrying him.

How often can one say no? Vera saw him every day, and every day he told her how much he loved her, and how miserable he would be until she was his wife.

Finally one day Vera said yes. But she added, "I don't love you, Alfredo. I respect you, but I don't love you."

Alfredo brushed away her words and cried exultantly, "You'll learn to love me. I'll make you love me!"

They were married in San Antonio, on September 18, 1932. The marriage took place in San Antonio because when the local branch of the Circus Fans Association, a national organization of circus admirers, heard of their engagement they invited Alfredo and Vera to have the ceremony performed at the annual meeting of the association, which was scheduled for the day the circus came to town.

The wedding attracted world-wide attention. It was held before the night show in the grand ballroom of the Gunther Hotel, and the best rooms were engaged for the bridal suite. The entire circus attended, and showered the couple with gifts and good wishes. In true show fashion, the bride and groom had to return to the tent, and give a performance as if nothing had happened. But the real celebration came later, when everyone quickly threw off his circus clothes and accompanied Vera and Alfredo to the hotel.

The trapeze performers, the aerialists, the acrobats, the riders, the freaks, all crowded into the bridal suite and feasted until dawn. The giant had a hard time to squeeze in and kept bumping his head in doorways. But he didn't mind. He laughed happily and toasted the couple. And when he raised his glass, it almost touched the ceiling. The German dwarf and his two sisters, had to climb on a table to kiss the bride and her husband, and I remember that the dwarf suddenly appeared as if from nowhere, shouting triumphantly. He had negotiated a passage between the legs of the guests.

It was a beautiful, gay occasion. Whatever the circus people knew about Alfredo and Clara, somewhere in the background,



Alfred Codona and Vera Bruce were married on September 18, 1932 in San Antonio, the day before Ringling-Barnum appeared there. The ceremony was part of the Circus Fans Association convention then going on in San Antonio and over sixty CFAs attended the nuptials. Left to right in photo, Vera's brother Clarence Bruce, his wife Rose Rieffenach Bruce who was matron of honor, Alfredo, Vera, and Lalo

perhaps a dismal background, were the ashes of Leitzel under her ten thousand dollar monument. They chose not to remember at this moment. They wanted to remember only that Alfredo Codona loved Vera Bruce, and from their very hearts they wished them a happy, happy life.

The marriage was followed by the conclusion of the circus season in America, and then Alfredo took Vera for a honeymoon in Europe, working part of the time.

I received letters from both. Alfredo was divinely happy. Vera wrote that she was happy, too. But when they returned I could see that Vera's fears had been realized. Alfredo had said that he would teach his wife to love him, but he had failed. Vera respected Alfredo; she had always admired him as an artist. But love him, she could not.

Why I will not venture to say. Alfredo was a glamorous character, but he was not for Vera. She knew that whatever he had done before, no matter how he had treated women, no matter under what circumstances he had married Leitzel, he truly loved her more, he worshiped her, idolized her. But she could not love him. She tried to be a good wife and gave him of her best as a professional partner, but beyond that she had nothing to offer.

Alfredo, however, was hopeful. He did not allow himself to doubt.

"Mother, she loves me now, but she does not know it," he used to tell me. Then, as I did not answer, for I did not know what to answer, his face turned momentarily pale and he cried out, "She must love me! I can't live if she doesn't!"

But these moods passed quickly. They gave place to confidence. It seemed impossible that any woman could not learn to love Alfredo Codona; especially when he offered her such a great, such a devoted love.

One night Alfredo was doing his celebrated triple somersault. With the lightness of a bird he launched into the air and, while the crowds stared upward at him in awe, as they always did, his body turned easily and gracefully three times. His hands reached for the hands of his brother, who hung down from his trapeze bar, tensed, ready to catch him.

But as Alfredo's fingers were about to slip into Lalo's fingers, that dread something which every circus performer religiously tries not to think of, happened. The fingers did not meet. There was a sickening wrench as only one hand made the contact, and then Alfredo dropped, writhing and twisting, into the net far below.

A cry of horror went up from spectators. Attendants rushed forward. Alfredo lay groaning in the net. He could not move. It is supposed by the public that the net will prevent injury in case of a fall. That is not so. It will save the performer from death, unless he bounces out of the net, but it will not save him from injuries, sometimes very serious. Alfredo fell awkwardly on his left shoulder. The miss in the air and the fall, wrenched his shoulder and tore the muscles.

For three weeks he lay in the hospital and, went through several operations. When he was discharged he knew that he could never again work as an aerialist.

It was a tremendous blow. All the glory that was Alfredo Codona's had suddenly vanished. All the applause, all the renown, were

Codona was equestrian director on Hagenbeck-Wallace and Forepaugh-Sells in 1935. He is shown here with circus photographer Harry Atwell on the Hagenbeck lot at Waukegan, Illinois on September 1, 1935.



gone. The high salary, the huge billing, no more.

Alfredo went about like a man in a dream. He could not adjust himself to this new existence. It was an existence that he could not conceive as being real.

Slowly, the merciless realization set in that he must no longer think at himself as one of the Flying Codonas. He was grounded. He must remain grounded.

He tried to be cheerful. He was given a position in the circus as director of the riders and, at the same time, he trained a performer to take his place with the act. But he could not be the old Codona, and the act could not be the same. He became irritable and had fits of moodiness, of brooding. It was

sheer bitterness for him to see another man fly into the air, and to hear the applause of the audience

Vera's heart went out to him, but it was in sympathy, not in love. She tried to mask her feelings. Alfredo needed consolation and affection, and she subordinated all her own emotions to give these to him.

But Alfredo was not deceived. He felt that his wife did not love him, and he both suffered and was enraged. Doggedly, he would not admit that he was responsible for this unhappy relationship. It was not possible that Vera was unable to love him. "It's like this, mother," he said to me once. "I've had all the women after me. What's the matter with your daughter that she does not love me?"

Their life together went on in this fashion, Alfredo feeling more and more keenly his downfall. He and Vera made their home in Long Beach, California, and when they went into Los Angeles, and Vera was engaged by the movie studios to double in trapeze work for some of the stars, Alfredo heard himself referred to as "Vera Codona's husband."

His face flushed, and he cringed. He did not blame Vera, but he could not help feeling miserably despondent. He refused to go to the places where he and Vera were invited, found no pleasure in life which Vera could share with him. Instead, he adopted an attitude of scorn or contempt toward many persons he met, and was often abusive.

It was now the beginning of the second [third] season after Alfredo had been injured. He had worked for the Tom Mix circus in a managerial capacity, and would probably do something of the same sort now. The Flying Codonas had been disbanded, and Vera was anxious to go back to Ringling Brothers circus, in which my son, Clary, had an important riding act, and where there was more opportunity for her.

Clary was eager to have her, and Alfredo could find no good reason why she should not join her brother's act. He had to make a business trip to Chicago at that time and it was agreed that she should go to Sarasota, the circus headquarters, as soon as she could.

Vera did leave for Sarasota, but when Alfredo returned from Chicago and did not find her at home he rushed into my room with the cry, "Mother, where is Vera?"

"Why, with her brother," I replied. "You agreed that she should go."

Then Alfredo went mad. I never saw him in such a fury. He stormed, he cursed, he threatened. Vera had no right to go. He forbade it. He would bring her back. He would drag her back.

I grew frightened. I tried to reason with him. But reason could not penetrate his mind. Vera had no right to go!

He would have been hateful, had it not been obvious that all this wild ranting was only because he loved Vera desperately. It was pitiful, and I could not help weeping. Alfredo was suffering so.

He tried to get Vera to come back, but Vera had already signed with the circus, and was about to leave for New York for the Madison Square Garden opening.

As soon as he learned this, Alfredo jumped into his car and drove at breakneck speed to New York.

There he had the further humiliation of being barred from the performers' quarters. He appeared so distracted that the manager feared he would create some disturbance, and forced him to wait outside, on the street, until Vera was able to join him.

Alfredo was unable to realize the real reason why he was excluded, and could only think that the great Codona had fallen so low that he was even refused the privilege of going backstage. This was as great a shock to him as hearing himself called "Vera Codona's husband."



Codona's last circus job was as equestrian director on the Tom Mix Circus in 1936. He is shown here on the Mix lot. Note sleepers on right behind Codona.

So he paced about furiously on the sidewalk, brooding, and torturing himself, until Vera appeared. Then he angrily reproached her for leaving him.

Perhaps Vera's outstanding trait was honesty and straight dealing. She had told Alfredo before she married him, that she did not love him. Now she felt that she had reached a point where she had to tell him that their marriage was a failure. He had hoped that she would learn to love him, but that hope had not been realized, and she felt it never could be realized.

"Alfredo," she said, "I am not happy with you. Honestly, I don't even like you to put your hands on me. This can't go on. The only thing to do is to get a divorce."

Alfredo stared at her strangely. I suppose he had often thought of the possibility that Vera would ask for a divorce, and had formed a plan to meet this contingency.

He changed his manner.

"I only want you to be happy, Vera," he said. "I married you on condition that I could make you learn to love me. I'll pay the penalty of my failure."

He said this as if he were convinced there was no other alternative but separation, and with this understanding they soon afterward parted. But in a letter to me, he wrote: "I have talked to Vera and finally she told me that she had not been happy with me for the last two years, and would rather be away from me. Vera does not always know, herself, what she wants. She is not happy here or anywhere else. She is a strange girl and until she finds herself, and finds what her little heart wants, she will never be happy."

Alfredo was still deceiving himself, living under the illusion that Vera did not love him because she herself was in an unsettled state and did not know what she wanted. Later, when he came back to Long Beach, I could gather from what he said, that he had agreed to Vera's divorce plans only to make her come to her senses. He was sure that when she was actually faced with taking the step to

separation, she would awaken and realize that she loved him, and had loved him all the time.

Vera continued with the circus and Alfredo remained in Long Beach, restless, brooding, hungering for Vera. The letters he sent her during this period pitifully mirrored his feelings.

"Dearest Wife Vera," read one. "In front of your picture I have two beautiful rosebuds, one white as snow, which stands for your character, mind and body, also your pure heart--the other, red, which stands for my love for you, and fierce jealousy for all the beautiful things you own and which are mine only."

In another letter, he wrote: "My darling, I do not discuss our love with anyone outside of telling the world that I have the best, sweetest, and most faithful little wife in the world. I do this because *I believe it; in fact, I know it.*"

"At seven twenty-five your sweet voice came across 3,300 miles and it made me so happy, I almost cried. I am glad your cold is better. I could tell that after our little three minutes together. I lay down on the davenport and, lonesome and blue, fell asleep thinking of you. Maybe something will happen over there to make you fed up with it, and you'll come home to the one who loves you more with every breath he draws."

After the circus season was ended, Vera returned to Long Beach. She was affected by Alfredo's letters, and by the great love he bore her, but she could see no happiness for them. It was a hopeless existence, and the longer she was with him, the more he would torture himself into the belief that sometime she might be able to return his love. She was certain that that time would never come, and she suffered almost as much in living this deception as Alfredo did in craving for her love.

So she decided to go through with the divorce and sever for all time their relationship.

But when she told that to Alfredo, and he discovered he had been wrong to believe she would change her mind, once she actually had to sue for a divorce, he became panic stricken. His fear that he would lose Vera took the form, as it often had in the past year or so, of a wild anger. Vera was frightened. She hesitated to begin the action, and when Alfredo saw that these tactics kept her from leaving him, he applied them continually.

From morning till night, he watched Vera like a hawk. He even tried to prevent my speaking to her. When I wanted to take her breakfast to her in bed, he took the tray from my hands, and carried it in himself. If there was a message for Vera, he hastened to deliver it before I could do so.

I felt great pity for him, but the situation was growing desperate. Vera was pale and nervous. I was afraid she would be ill. Something had to be done, and I took it upon myself to make the first move. Through our family doctor, I was recommended to a good lawyer, and told him the story. The lawyer assured me that a divorce could be obtained, and asked Vera to consult him at once.

I returned home, found an opportunity to speak to Vera privately, and explained what I had done. "Tomorrow," I said, "tell Alfredo that you're going to the beauty parlor, and while you are out see this attorney."

Vera agreed, and the following day managed to get to the beauty parlor without Alfredo's following her. From there she hurriedly called on the lawyer, and the necessary papers were drawn up.

The next few months were hell for all of us. Alfredo was alternately in tears, or raging like a madman. One day he would say to Vera, "Sweetheart, you don't want me anymore--so I hope you will be happy divorced." The next day he would almost break the door down to get into her apartment, and threaten her with violence if she left him.



The funeral of Alfredo Codona took place at Inglewood Cemetery in Inglewood, California on August 3, 1937. His casket is visible beneath the statue of himself and Lillian Leitzel that he commissioned soon after her death in 1931.

But the law took its inevitable course, and when Alfredo saw that Vera indeed was slipping out of his life, he became strangely resigned, hopelessly, sadly resigned.

"You don't love me; what can I do?" he said. "I can't stand in the way of your happiness."

Finally all the settlements were made. Although under the California law the wife is entitled to half of her husband's possessions, Vera said she wanted no more than six thousand dollars, much less than half of Alfredo's estate.

"I am young and I can work," she said, when the lawyer protested. "I don't want Alfredo to give me more than that."

The decree was awarded, and Vera was free.

Because of the strain she had been under and to avoid possible unpleasantness with Alfredo, her lawyer advised Vera to leave town for a while. Vera said she would think it over.

That very night there came a knocking at our door. I glanced through the window and saw Alfredo's car outside. We wouldn't let him in, and after knocking for about five minutes, he went away.

I then insisted that Vera take rooms in a hotel, and the next morning she did so. I had to remain in our house because of my dog, which the hotel refused to take in. About 3:00 a. m. a banging on the door woke me up. It was Alfredo, asking to come in. He sounded like a lost spirit.

In the chill of the night this seemed like a nightmare. I was afraid. Quickly I threw a kimono about me, and slipped out of the

back door. I ran up the road to a neighbor's house and had them drive me to the police station. There I got an officer to come home with me. No one was there.

I stayed awake until six, then rushed over to Vera. "You've got to go away!" I cried. "Alfredo tried to get in last night again."

Vera thought I was unduly frightened, and more for my peace of mind than for her own safety, she agreed to leave for a short vacation.

Both of us packed up and drove to a ranch about four hundred miles away, giving our address only to Vera's lawyer.

A few weeks later, a letter came from the lawyer saying the money Vera was to receive from Alfredo was ready to be paid, and asked her to return to Long Beach to receive it.

We drove back, first to Los Angeles, where we stayed overnight and notified the lawyer when we would arrive, then to Long Beach.

When we got into town Vera telephoned the lawyer, and suggested that I call at his office for the check. The lawyer agreed. Vera dropped me off at the office building, and said she would wait for me in a restaurant nearby.

In the office I found Alfredo. He came forward to greet me. "Hello, mother, how are you?"

We shook hands.

"How's Vera?" he went on.

"Vera's Vera," I replied non-committally.

We sat down. Alfredo was wan, his eyes sunken. He seemed not to know what to say to me, and yet he was anxious to talk. At last he said, "Mother, you know what you did? You didn't pay for the newspapers when you left the old house."

I didn't understand at the moment that he was just marking time, taking refuge in a random remark, and I became quite angry. "I paid

Our Cover and These Pages

From mid-November to Christmas Day 1930, Lillian Leitzel and the Flying Codonas were featured at Cirque d'Hiver in Paris. In January 1931 both acts appeared at the Winter Garden variety theater in Berlin. In February, while the Codonas continued at the Winter Garden, Leitzel went to Copenhagen to perform at the Valencia Music Hall. She fell on February 13, and died two days later, setting a motion a chain of events that led her widower Alfredo Codona to commit a murder-suicide six years later.

Ironically, Leitzel said she always watched the Flying Codonas except when Alfredo did the triple. She would turn her head, fearful he would be seriously injured. He eventually was, but two years after his wife's death.

The posters on the cover and on these two pages are from the Cirque d'Hiver engagement in November and December 1930. The lithograph on the cover measures 26" x 72". Loosely translated it reads: "The dizzying Lillian Leitzel," and "All the stars of Circus Barnum and Bayley of New York." Obviously, the French forgot or more likely didn't care how James A. Bailey spelled his surname.

The poster on these two pages measures 24" x 64". James Bailey gets no billing on this one as it reads: "The stars of the Barnum Circus of New York." Lillian Leitzel is called, "The greatest gymnast of the era," while the Codonas are, "The only trapeze performers executing the perilous triple somersault 20 Meters Height."

Both are exceptional examples of circus advertising and both are published here for the first time in America. Original in Pfening Archives. **BW**





La PLUS FORTE GYMNASTE DE L'ÉPOQUE

LES
FLYING CODONAS

LES SEULS TRAPÉZISTES EXÉCUTANT LE TRIPLE
SAUT PÉRILLEUX A 20 MÈTRES DE HAUTEUR



Cover of *True Story* magazine in which this article appeared. Codona was enough of a household name that his tragedy got top billing.

all the bills," I said, "and it isn't nice of you to accuse me of running away, owing people money."

I rose and instinctively took a step toward the door.

"No—please, mother—don't go!" he cried. "Come back and sit down."

I sat down. He was silent for a moment. Then aimlessly he put his hand in his pocket and drew out two little anklets. "Look, mother," he said, "this is all I have of Vera. She left them on the line." He touched them lightly with his lips, then rolled them up and returned them to his pocket. He shivered and looked up at me helplessly.

"Mother, it's all over," he said. "We're divorced. I love Vera. I love her very much. But if she doesn't want me, if she isn't happy, I don't want her to stay with me. But I'd like to say good-by to her. Where is she?"

"She's waiting for me near here," I told him.

"Then will you bring her? I want to say good-by and wish her good luck. Let us part friends. Some day she might want a friend—sometime I might want a friend. Won't you bring her?"

It would have been heartless to refuse. "All right. I'll get her," I said.

I hurried over to the restaurant. "You'd better come over, Vera. Alfredo's there, and he wants to say good-by to you."

Vera hesitated. "Mother, I don't want to go. I'd rather not see him. He may be in one of those moods."

"No," I assured her, "he's all right. He just wants to say good-by."

Vera rose and accompanied me back to the lawyer's office. The lawyer greeted her. Alfredo kissed her hand, and placed a chair for her. There were a few casual remarks, then Alfredo turned to the

lawyer. "Would you please go out for a little while? I want to have a talk with my wife."

"That's up to Vera," the lawyer replied.

"You may go out," Vera told him.

The lawyer went out. Alfredo got up and shut the door. At the same time, as he turned to face us, his hand rested for a moment on the lock behind his back.

He crossed to where Vera sat. Without a word, he dropped on his knees and began kissing every part of her dress.

Vera was overcome by the suffering so painfully expressed by Alfredo's actions. He was like a man who had been separated from his soul.

She struggled to her feet.

Alfredo rose, too.

Suddenly he burst out into some incoherent words, and before my eyes could follow what was happening, a gun in Alfredo's hand was firing at Vera.

One shot—two—three—four!

I was paralyzed. Every part of my body seemed turned to ice. Vera fell to the floor, blood trickling out of her dear body, from her head, from her breast, from her side. Alfredo ignored me. He raised the gun to his head and fired. Silently he collapsed at Vera's side and lay still.

Shouts outside the door brought me to my senses. I tried to open the door. It was locked. Alfredo had locked it. I turned the key. The door was pushed open, the room was filled with people, and I knew no more.

Vera died the next day in the hospital. Her last words were, "Mother, are you hurt?"

And I said, "No, dear sweetheart, I am not hurt." A few minutes later she was dead.

Alfredo died instantly. In his pocket was found a snapshot of Vera with these words written on the back: "I loved her so much I couldn't live without her"

And so came to an end the story of Vera and Alfredo Codona. I, the mother of Vera Codona, had brought her to her death.

"Bring her to me. I want to say good-by."

And I had brought her to him, and he had said his good-by. My beautiful young daughter now lies under a block of granite. On it are sculptured the words: "Peace at Last"

She has peace, God rest her soul. But what peace is there for me, knowing how her life was cut short?

The story of Vera and Alfredo Codona is now a legend of circus life, told with tears in the eyes and sorrow in the heart. It is stark tragedy. And, as in all great tragedies, those who are guilty of the tragedy cannot be completely blamed. Alfredo Codona loved my daughter, loved her with a passion that possessed him with an overpowering force. Circumstances disorganized him, and helped to drive him deeper and deeper into the blackness from which sprang his bloody deed.

Tragedy was probably inevitable for Alfredo Codona. But others reading of him must take warning which I, with all the tears and sorrow which are my lot, cannot too strongly impress. Love cannot be forced, and those who enter into a loveless marriage, hoping that love will follow, run the risk of a devastating sequel.

Alfredo Codona said to Vera, "Marry me, and I will teach you to love me."

How often have those words been spoken before? They are false and dangerous, and the world is filled with the tragedies they have brought about.

Vera and Alfredo Codona are dead.

My plea is that the cause of their death shall be remembered. **BW**

Alfred Codona and the art Of the Aerial Acrobat

BY COSMOPOLITE

The following pseudonymous article appeared in the Winter 1937-1938 issue of *The Sawdust Ring*, the publication of the Circus Fans Association of Great Britain. At that time the magazine was edited by Raymond Toole-Stott, who later compiled a monumental five-volume bibliography of the circus.

In common with all circus lovers I mourn the passing of one of its outstanding characters—that brilliant artiste Alfredo Codona, news of whose tragic death was flashed across the world in August last. So many conflicting accounts have appeared of his work and career that, before attempting to touch on his great skill and talents, I propose to record certain biographical facts which have been verified for me by the kindness of his brother, Lalo.

His Birth and Marriages.

Alfredo, son of Edward Codona, proprietor of a tenting circus in Mexico, was born on October 7th, 1893, at Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico, and acquired American citizenship in 1933. His death took place at Long Beach, California, on July 30th, 1937. Many hundreds of friends, "troopers" and circus enthusiasts attended the last sad rites when his remains were sorrowfully laid to rest beside the imposing marble statue, labelled Reunion which he had erected some five years previously to the memory of his second wife—the famous Lillian Leitzel. Married in Chicago in August, 1928, they were greatly attached to one another, and the accident (the breaking of a ring) which caused Lillian's death when performing in Copenhagen on 13th February, 1931, was one of the major tragedies in the history of the circus world. Alfredo had been previously married in Havana, in 1917, to Clara Curtin, who worked for many years in the great act which he founded with his brother Lalo. They were divorced in the winter of 1927. Strange as it may seem, in none of the obituary notices published in this country at the time of his death could I find any reference to this union, though Clara Curtin was a fine artiste and worthy of a place in the star constellation created by her husband and brother-in-law. She is still known under the name of Clara Codona and is living at Cincinnati, Ohio. In September, 1932, Alfredo married his third wife, Vera Bruce, who had succeeded Clara Curtin in the aerial act and whose brother Clarence is one of the most famous of riders, married to a Rieffenach and member of that renowned equestrian troupe.

I count amongst my many pleasant memories of circus artistes a delightful visit paid to me some years ago at my flat in Paris by Alfredo, accompanied by both Vera Bruce and his wife, Lillian Leitzel. The last-named was the most enthusiastic of "troopers" and possessed a positively encyclopaedic knowledge of everything bearing on the sawdust ring, with which she had been connected from childhood. It seemed impossible to name an artiste, particularly in America, with whom she had not worked. Her stories of

PARIS, 25 DÉCEMBRE 1930

1822 **CIRQUE D'HIVER** 1930

**joyeux
noël
!!!**



M. Gaston DESPREZ
Directeur du
Cirque d'Hiver
de Paris



Miss LILLIAN LEITZEL
la grande
vedette
américaine



**Les
célèbres**

**FLYING
CODONA**

**A Miss Lillian Leitzel... Aux Amis Codona...
Hommage de bonne amitié**

GASTON DESPREZ.

Both the Flying Codonas and Lillian Leitzel performed at the famed Cirque D'Hiver in Paris in December of 1930. Gaston Desprez, owner of the circus, thought enough of both artists to run their pictures along with his on his 1930 Christmas card. Fifty days later, Leitzel was dead. Pfening Archives.

life behind the scenes and the modesty of Alfredo when discussing technicalities of his work are still fresh in my memory.

His Career.

Alfredo established his flying number in the first instance with Wirth Bros. in Australia in 1913, his father being then the catcher, and for six seasons he did a single trapeze act, and his sister Victoria a slack wire number with the Barnum and Bailey show. For



Alfredo Codona at the apex of his swing. As Arthur Concello said, Codona could look good getting hit by a truck. Photo taken during Ringling-Barnum engagement in Chicago in late 1920s by Harry Atwell. Pfening Archives.

the summer season of 1916, Alfredo joined the Silbons' troupe of fourteen artistes, who specialized in cross flying acts, and he left them in the winter of 1917 to found his own number with Lalo in Havana. Subsequently, with his partners, he was from 1927 to 1933 featured as the star attraction of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Reports have gained currency that the accident which finally necessitated Alfredo's retirement from active trapeze work (he continued to coach pupils including Clayton Behee who is now working with his brother) had taken place when he was doubling for Weismuller in the *Tarzan* film at Hollywood. This is incorrect. In the first instance he tore a muscle of his right arm in April, 1932, at Maddison Square Garden and a year later, in attempting his triple somersault at the evening performance on 29th April, 1933, in the same building, he injured very badly the remaining muscles of both arm and shoulder. For many months he hoped against hope that in time he might return to work, but unfortunately the injuries proved too serious. Rather than retire altogether, he accepted the position of equestrian director to the Hagenbeck-Wallace show in 1934 and 1935 and during the following season occupied a similar appointment with Tom Mix.

Appearance at Olympia.

Alfredo's first appearance in Europe was at the Colisée de Recreios in Lisbon in 1922, from there he moved on to fulfil contracts in Madrid and elsewhere, returning to America eighteen months later. Subsequently, with his brother and lady partner, he reappeared in Europe in 1925 and opened with Hagenbeck in Hamburg. His outstanding success at Olympia, London, during the winter season of 1925-1926 was on a par with his numerous triumphs both in America and on the continent of Europe.

He was under engagement to work at Olympia once more during the Christmas season of 1931-1932, but a cable received a fortnight before he was due announced that he had been the victim of a motor accident, so that this contract was never fulfilled.

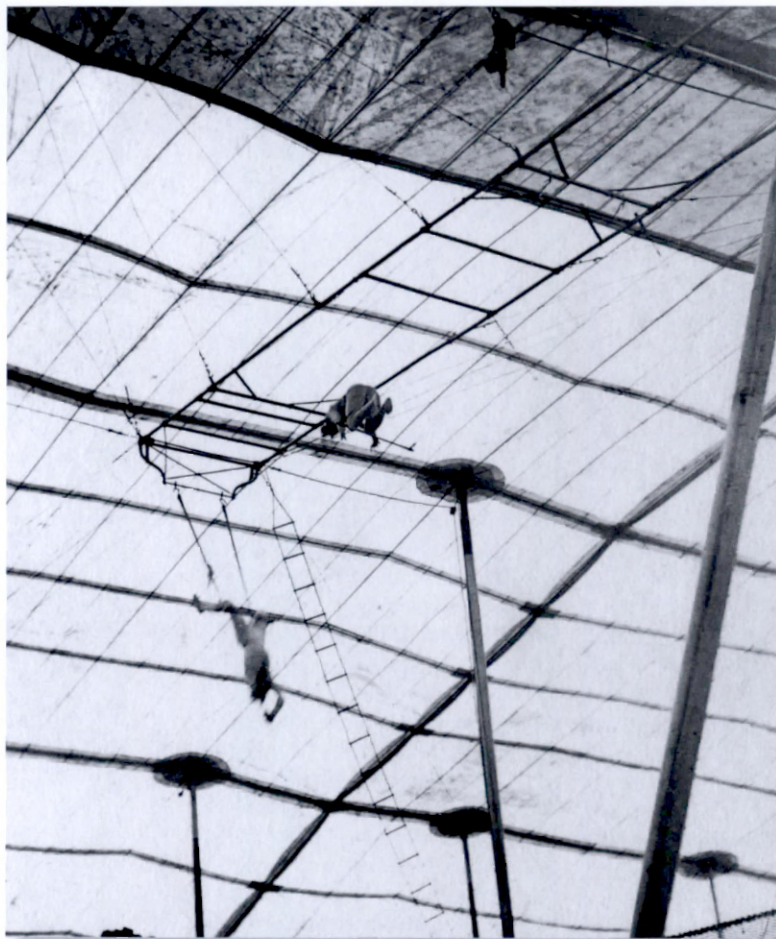
It may be interesting to try and analyse how it was that Alfredo reached a position as aerial acrobat which has certainly never been surpassed and, in the opinion of many experts, never equalled. To my personal knowledge such eminent judges as Ted Volta, Monsieur Henri Thétard, Courtney Ryley Cooper and Alphonse Rancy all regarded him as the finest trapeze artiste that the world has seen. Probably "little Bob" (Carnody) the worldfamed pupil of the Hanlon-Volta troupe (whose early training had been with the Hanlon-Lees) and Jules Alex were his closest rivals.

Aerial Technique.

I consider that in the main their superiority in each instance should be attributed to that wonderful and quite exceptional "lift" which they possessed owing to the remarkable power and development of the muscles of their arms and back. This "lift" enabled them to rise materially higher than the ordinary performer when they released their hold of the swinging trapeze, thus affording them a greater space of time, after executing their somersaults, in which to finish the remainder of their particular feat. The result was that they left the impression on their audiences of having accomplished their acts with consummate ease and certainty.

Furthermore, Alfredo possessed—quite apart from his skill as a showman—the great advantage of a most attractive appearance, a

Alfredo in mid-somersault while executing the triple into the arms of his catcher, his brother Lalo. Photo taken at Philadelphia on May 18, 1929. Pfening Archives.





The famous Codona-Leitzel monument at Inglewood Cemetery, dedicated by Alfredo on December 10, 1931, ten months after Lillian Leitzel's death. Note the broken ring on right under Leitzel's feet, symbolizing both the cause of her death and the severing of the bonds between her and Alfredo. Pfening Archives.

lithe and perfect figure and a beautifully developed body. He also combined a power, rare amongst trapeze artistes, of executing his pirouettes (to which his natural build lent itself) with the same ease and distinction as his famous somersaults.

The Triple Somersault.

When first he announced his intention of including a triple somersault in his regular programme, the manager of the leading music hall in Berlin warned him that this must inevitably end in his death. He drew his attention to the list of his predecessors who had attempted this feat which till then, had always ended fatally. Alfredo, whose daring and patience in unceasing practice were proverbial,

persisted, and he included his triple at almost every performance until the end of his career.

It is true that, since he pointed the way, various of his colleagues, including . . . the Concellos and others, have followed suit, but this is due partly to the lengthening of the trapeze containing the "cradle" in which the catcher hangs and also to the raising of the departure platform of the flier. Nevertheless, the triple somersault to the catcher still constitutes the high water mark of aerial acrobatism, particularly when performed with Alfredo's incomparable elegance and precision. If asked to name the three outstanding numbers regularly accomplished by Alfredo I should single out his:

(a) double somersault and catch to a small trapeze held by his brother Lalo from the "cradle" and return with a back somersault.

(b) a double somersault and a half, catching by the houghs and return with a double pirouette and a half.

(c) triple somersault to the hands and return with double pirouette and a half.

At the same time I have little doubt that Alfredo was capable of performing any and every trick in the entire repertory of this particular sort of work, and, what is more astonishing still, of making them all appear to be relatively simple. I am given to understand that the length of the swing at which Alfredo and his partners worked at the zenith of their success was some eighteen to twenty-four inches longer than that of any other act. If so, this may have accentuated the impression, invariably present in my own mind, of a longer and more birdlike flight than is noticeable in other acts. On the other hand, it may have been due to the particular poise of Alfredo's body as he swung through the air, or perhaps to a combination of both factors.

Bar to Bar Flying.

The "art" of bar to bar (baton a baton) flying is, of course, far more strenuous and exacting than to a catcher. One has only to realize the terrific momentum with which the artiste, weighing anything between ten and twelve stone, must be travelling after completing a double or triple somersault. If he works to a catcher there is a certain and definite degree of elasticity, but where he has to finish by grasping an ashwood bar with a steel core his difficulties are enormously enhanced. He runs a grave risk of wrenching the muscles of arms and shoulders, not to speak of the possibility, in the case of faulty timing, of being struck on the mouth, face or head by the heavy bar itself. The well-known Edmond Rainat, instructor and leader in his day of so many troupes, was probably the greatest exponent of the bâton à bâton act. He assured me some ten years ago that he was then practising assiduously and on the point of performing in public a triple somersault from bar to bar. However, despite his remarkable pluck, he never reached the stage of accomplishing it regularly, which is scarcely surprising in a man of his heavy build. Yet at the age of sixty-two he is to-day teaching pupils at his little gymnasium at Saint Leu-la-Forêt, near Paris, and is still capable of showing them many an audacious act. To those of my readers who care to pursue the technical side of the flying trapeze I can-

not do better than recommend them to secure a copy of *L'Auto* of 28th September, 1937. In it, my old friend Monsieur Thétard, a recognized expert, describes most graphically and charmingly a day spent at this peaceful little spot watching Rainat and his pupils at work.

Origin of the Flying Trapeze.

Ted Volta, leader of the Hanlon-Volta act, hale, hearty and alert, in his eighty-seventh year, is an example of the aerial acrobat who, despite so dangerous a calling, has reached a fine old age. His twin brother, the much lamented Taff (so like him in appearance that it was difficult to distinguish one from the other) only passed away on Christmas morning of 1935. In the course of a most interesting afternoon which I recently spent with Mr. Volta, he mentioned an incident which may be new to readers of *The Sawdust Ring*. It establishes conclusively how the idea of the flying trapeze first originated. The brothers Volta happened to be performing in 1876 at the Casino in the Rue Lafayette at Toulouse where Léotard (the creator in November, 1859, of the first flying trapeze) had been born and educated. His father was the possessor of a gymnasium and swimming bath and of this "gymnase Léotard" the Voltas were made honorary members. In the course of conversations with the manager, who had been there for many years, he told them that one afternoon young Léotard had been on the point of having a swim after finishing his practice when he noticed parallel cords hanging from each of two ventilators in the roof. They served to open and to shut the ventilators, but it occurred to Léotard that if a wooden bar were fixed between each, he could then swing, from one to the other and, in his own words, risk nothing worse than an impromptu bath. From this started what we know now as aerial acrobaticism.

Léotard in London.

Léotard, when he first appeared at the Alhambra in London, swung from a single trapeze up to a perch and a padded mattress was spread along the whole length of the stage. Later developments took the form of substituting a second trapeze for the perch, and a net (which to-day is still in vogue) for the mattress. In the early stages the majority of the leading aerial performers were of French descent. Names such as Alex, Aleximes (R. Burnier), Maxime, both pupils of Tules Alex, Algevol, Rixford, Rainat are known to all circus lovers. They seemed to specialize in it, as did the Roumanians (Poppescus and many others) on the horizontal bar. Later America gained the ascendancy with such great exponents as the Codonas, Siegrist Silbons, the Clarkonians and the Concellos. Today I am assured on excellent authority that there are at least three artistes in the U.S.A. capable of doing regularly their triple somersaults.

An Interesting Phenomenon.

Before closing these notes, I would mention briefly one other topic which has always intrigued me. I refer to what Cleveland Moffet has described in his admirable articles on trapeze work in *Careers of Danger and Daring* (The Century Co., New York, 1926). Let me quote his own words: "In talking with acrobats, I came upon an interesting phenomenon that seems almost like a violation of the laws of gravitation. It appears that the movements of a performer on the bars or trapeze are affected in a marked degree by the slope of the ground underneath. In other words, although bars and trapeze may rest on supports that are perfectly level, yet the swing of an acrobat's body will be accelerated over a downward slope or retarded over an upward slope. So true is this that the trapeze performer swinging over an up-

ward slope will often require all his strength to reach a given point, while over a downward slope he must hold back, lest he reach it too easily and suffer a collision. Nevertheless, the swing in both cases is precisely the same, with rigging and bars fixed to a true level.

"On this point there have been endless arguments and many persons have contended that acrobats must imagine all this since the upward or downward slope of the ground under a trapeze can in no way affect the movement of the trapeze. I fancy the wisdom of such people is like that of the professors who proved some years ago that it is a physical impossibility for a ball-player to 'pitch a curve.' There is no doubt that trapeze performers are obliged to take serious account of the ground's slope in their daily work, to note carefully the amount of slope and direction of slope, and to take their precautions accordingly. Those are the facts; let scientists explain them as they may." Suffice for me to add that I have discussed this subject with many performers, including Alfred Codona, and also with an authority as keen and competent as Courtney Ryley Cooper, to whom we are indebted for so many absorbing and brilliant articles on the circus in general and the flying trapeze in particular. One and all have agreed with the accuracy of the statement in question. **BW**

Poster printed in Budapest, Hungary used to promote the Flying Codonas in Europe in the 1920s. Used with permission from Illinois State University, Special Collections, Milner Library.



I Can't Hold Any Longer

By Rick Wallenda

January 30, 1962, changed everything for the Wallenda family and the rest of the circus world. The accident that night, sometimes referred to in our family as the big accident, changed our lives, the act, our traveling company, and life at home; our destiny from that night forward assumed an unexpected direction.

Uncle Dick Faughnan, and Deiter Schepp died, and Uncle Mario Wallenda is still in a wheel chair fifty years later. Seven people were on the wire, connected in a pyramid with shoulder bars, carrying balance poles weighing from twenty-five to sixty pounds for the last man in the pyramid. Everyone fell sequentially as one-by-one each person succumbed to the loss of support beneath or was pulled from his or her position.

The mighty Moslem Shrine Circus in Detroit, held annually in January during those years, hosted the Wallenda troupe in 1962. My grandparents, Karl and Helen Wallenda, prepared for the engagement just as they had done in prior years. The winter of 1961-1962 presented nothing different. Preparing two new members of the troupe that year had occurred many times in the past. My grandfather and his older brother Herman saw no unusual markers to warn that a disaster approached.

This great act from Germany arrived on the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1928 with four persons, and shocked all witnesses in the first performance in Madison Square Garden on April 5. Fred Bradna's noted in his book *The Big Top* that it was the only time in Ringling history that an act stopped the big show. The group was listed in the program as the Wallenda Troupe, and followed by a bareback riding act, the Reifenach Sisters. Less than a year later the Albany Shrine Circus program first used the adjective "Great" in connection with the Wallendas.

Two years later the family expanded their offering to Ringling-Barnum with a second high wire troupe, called the Grotefent Troupe, which included my grandfather's step-father, George; his younger brother Arthur, and my grandmother's younger sister, Henrietta; whom we called Aunt Yetty, and two others. That act remained with Ringling until a strike closed the show in Scranton, Pennsylvania on June 22, 1938, after which they joined other star acts from Ringling on the Al. G. Barnes-Sells Floto Circus.

In oral tradition passed on to me, in the winter months both troupes practiced together, and began the earliest stages of the seven in the 1930's. Various configurations were tried until the most practical emerged in the final form. First they tried three on the bottom, supporting two, and on top my grandparents in a two person tier. That pyramid collapsed. Arthur Trostle told me that he was the middle man on the wire, and it catapulted him all the way to the fence at the edge of the property. The final configuration, four supporting two with one topping with a chair, eventually proved the best.

Once, in practice only, they accomplished an eight-person-pyramid with my grandparents two person column on top. A film shows my grandmother slithering from the wire up Uncle Arthur's shoulders to the first tier, then up Uncle Herman to the next tier, finally reaching my grandfather at the pinnacle. They only practiced this in case competitors attempted the seven. If that happened the Wallendas could up the ante. They offered the seven to Ringling for the 1947 season, but management refused. The trick first appeared in public as part of the Wallenda Circus, April 8, 1947, in Bradenton, Florida—almost nineteen years to the day after they began with



Letterhead for the Great Wallendas High Wire Sensation from the late 1920s or early 1930s. Pfening Archives.

Ringling. The Wallenda archives records indicate no less than thirty-eight individuals served in the Great Wallendas high wire troupe from the inception until that night in Detroit.

Some say the Wallenda act achieved notoriety through the hideous accident in Detroit. The facts tell a different story. From the first appearance, which garnered a standing ovation, stopping the Greatest Show on Earth, until the seven collapsed, the Wallenda high wire act headlined programs, appeared in Radio City Music Hall on the opening bill with Ray Bolger in 1932, headlined the Berlin Winter Garten in 1933 and 1936, appeared on a box of Wheaties and a pack of Chesterfields, and once in the 1940's, the Ringling Brothers Circus purchased a full page ad in the *New York Times* posting a photo of the Wallenda high wire troupe, and no other act or image—the only act in history to be featured by the giant circus in this way. The advertising agent realized the value of this act long before the accident in 1962, and even before the seven first appeared in public with the Wallenda Circus in 1947.

Fourteen years, nine months and twenty-two days after the seven first sailed into prominence, it collapsed, leaving two dead and Uncle Mario still in a wheel chair. Any loss of life in our beloved family entertainment is a tragedy, and should never happen. That night Detroit spectators witnessed an unforgettable event that fifty years later still brings questions from visitors at autograph sessions, and meet and greets after our shows.

The pandemonium that followed is impossible to capture in words. Balance poles clanging on the wire then the ground, people falling from the wire and hitting the ring mat below, screams from the audience, people running away from and toward the ring, mass confusion and chaos, animals in the backdoor stirring, and other performers gasping as they see the seven in an unintended condition, their friends helplessly dropping from their positions on the wire. In the seconds immediately after the front man Dieter screamed, "Ich kann nicht mehr halten!" (I can't hold any more!), words that resound through the Wallenda family still today, all eyes turned to the wire, and the entire world learned, through the media, the dangers circus daredevils face. Those words mark the defining moment for the Wallenda family. That phrase shouted in utter terror from the lips of a nineteen year old apprentice just arrived from Germany, signaled to my grandfather Karl and everyone else in the troupe that something terrible was about to happen. That phrase marked the end of the Great Wallendas high wire troupe in its magnificent glory.

In the pyramid that night, Dieter, a maternal cousin to Aunt Jenny, stood in the front on the wire. Behind him was Uncle Mario, the

son of my grandmother Helen's brother, but adopted by my grandparents when his father died in 1950. Next on the wire, Uncle Dick, Aunt Jenny's husband, walked behind Uncle Mario. Behind Uncle Dick, on the wire, stood Uncle Gunther, son of Uncle Herman. On the second level on the bar supported by Dieter and Uncle Mario, my grandfather Karl Wallenda, whom we called Vati; German for Daddy, stood like a beacon. Behind Vati, on the bar supported by Uncles Dick and Gunther, stood Uncle Herman connected by a longer bar to Vati in front. On that bar, on a chair, forming the third tier sat Jana Schepp, Dieter's older sister.

Dieter collapsed beneath the weight of the pyramid above and behind him when he dropped his balance pole. Vati, supported by the shoulder bar above Dieter and Uncle Mario, was forced forward and down toward the wire. Above Vati, Jana sat on another shoulder bar positioned on the chair. She was pushed forward by the inertia of collapsing support beneath her bar in the rear connected to Uncle Herman. The bar pulled him forward as Vati slid toward Dieter. Behind Dieter on the wire stood Uncle Mario connected to him by the bar supporting Vati. Everything above Uncle Mario's head crashed downward, balance poles, shoulder bar, and a chair. Jana's pole weighed around twenty-five pounds, the chair another dozen, and the bar about the same. Uncle Mario had little chance of remaining on the wire, and pummeled behind Dieter. Behind Uncle Mario standing on the wire, Uncle Dick faced the same obstacle course. His bar connected to Uncle Gunther, supported Uncle Herman.



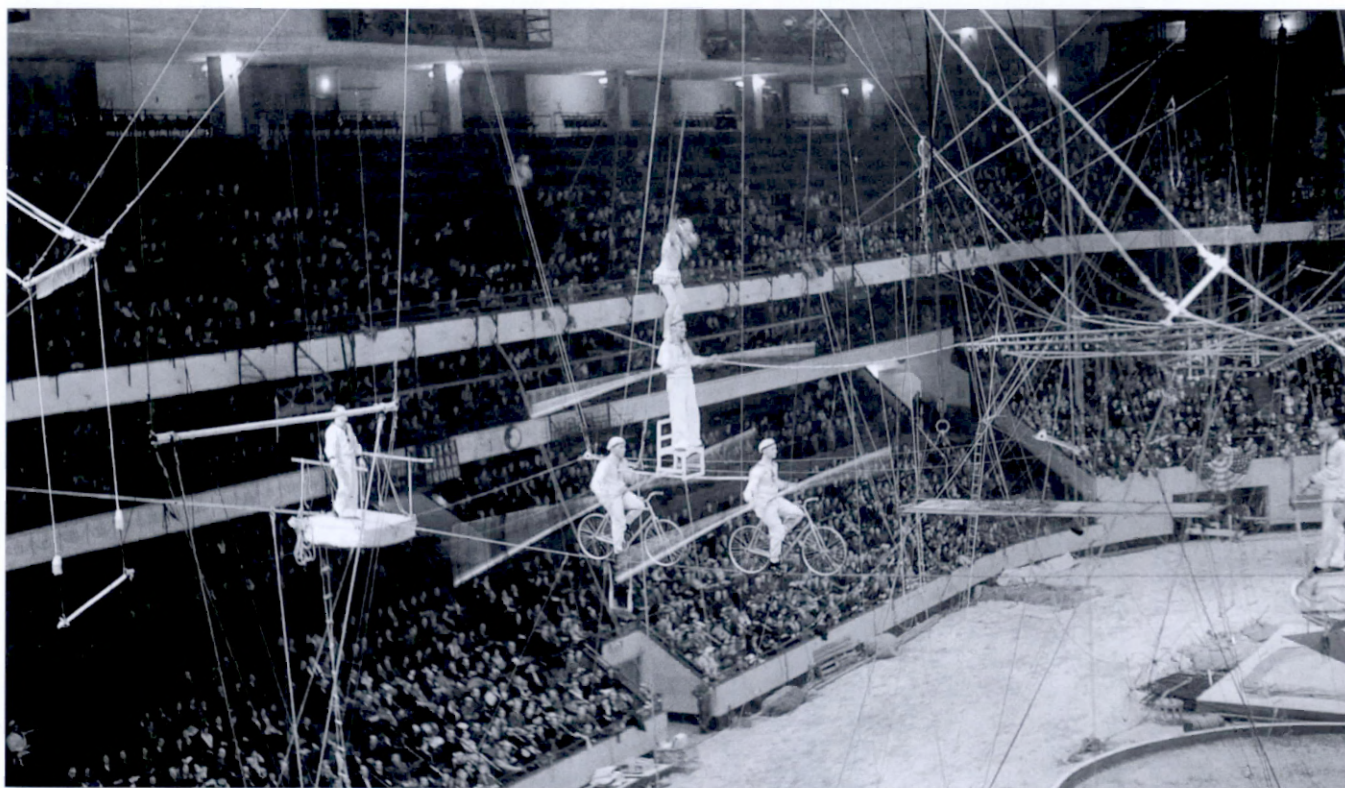
Publicity photograph of the Wallendas about 1928. Left to right, Joe Geiger, Karl Wallenda, Herman Wallenda, and Helen Kreis. Circus World Museum collection.

We have all been trained to never release the pole. With hands occupied gripping the balance pole, there is no way to deflect obstacles flying past. Uncle Herman fell into that debris field. Uncle Dick went down next. Vati arrived at the wire feet first approximately on the spot where Dieter stood seconds before, and straddled it, causing serious damage to his body. With the balance pole no longer needed, he grabbed everything he could. Jana landed on his back, clutching for her life as well. He grabbed her and the wire in a miraculous grasp, saving her from death below.

Uncle Herman landed on a mass of poles and bars entangled in guy wires from the wire, and managed to clutch something for safety, but injured his head, nearly rendering him unconscious. Uncle Gunther was left standing on the wire, sixty-pound pole in hand, watching the destruction before his eyes. I heard him say he had no idea how that happened. He never took credit for greater skill or ability than the others.

On the ground Tommy Hanneford, John Herriott, Ernie Burch, Marga Nicholas, and others acted quickly. Hanneford drug his comedy acrobatic tumbling mat into the ring. It was a mere mattress-sized pad, but the only available cushion, a necessity at that point. Jana clung to Vati, but he had no strength left. She was about

The Great Wallendas on Ringling-Barnum in Madison Square Garden, 1935. Joe Geiger is on the lead bicycle with Herman Wallenda behind him. Karl Wallenda is on the chair with Helen Wallenda on his shoulders in the act's signature trick. Pfening Archives.





Karl Wallenda keeps a paternal eye on his daughter Carla in a 1942 photograph taken in Sarasota. Joe Geiger, who isn't holding a balancing pole, is in the lead. Maxwell Frederic Coplan photo, Pfening Archives.

to fall to the ground. Fast-thinking veteran performers held the landing pad below. Uncle Herman and Uncle Gunther assisted Vati, but eventually Jana fell. The skill of the performers below caught her in the pad. She skidded from the pad to the ground and was knocked unconscious beside her brother Deiter.

Deiter, Uncle Dick, Uncle Mario, and Jana lay in the ring, still and silent. Vati clung to the wire above; little strength remained in his wounded body. Uncle Herman made it to the pedestal while Uncle Gunther helped Vati.

The Hanneford family of bareback riders followed the Wallenda act that night, like the Reifenach sisters who followed my family after they had stopped the big show almost thirty-five years before. This night the Hanneford riders waited for a different reason. Tommy Hanneford told me it took nearly an hour to get everyone off the floor. Aunt Jenny offers a different account. She told me that when she arrived at the hospital all injured parties were already there. Surely the waiting seemed great, and perhaps was agonizingly long when waiting with several anxious horses. Perhaps Aunt Jenny lost track of time in the confusion.

"Maybe Dick would have lived if they'd have gotten to him sooner," Tommy said. "Only one ambulance came for them. When we went into the ring with the horses, the canvas mat was still stained with blood. We could barely work."

The Hannefords did a great act ordinarily, one of the few I could sit and watch every show. Tommy was a comedian on horseback, and was still entertaining to me even after seeing his routine hundreds of times. On that night it was impossible to be funny. The audience had just witnessed a horrible accident, and Tommy tried to follow with comedy. The show did go on, but only in the academic sense. The show lacked spontaneity, smiles, laughter, and failed to capture the hearts of spectators. Everyone wanted the show to end.

The next matinee after this accident, Uncle Herman, and Uncle Gunther presented a small act. In the ring below lay the blood stained canvas mat. They needed no reminder. My grandfather watched the news reel from his hospital bed in pain, frustrated by comments from newscasters. He left the hospital and went to the State Fairground Coliseum. He ascended the high wire rigging for

the night show, and performed his signature trick, the chair pyramid on bicycles, with a cracked pelvis and double hernia. No one exemplifies "the show must go on" tradition more than Karl Wallenda.

Mike McGuire stood on the platform the previous night, a fully qualified veteran of the trick, watching the seven fall. Many asked why Mike didn't replace Deiter that night. I asked Mike about it, and he said he offered to take Deiter's place when he complained of a cold, but Deiter refused the offer.

As a boy after the accident my main concern was my mother. I only knew she left me behind for school while she went to work. I didn't realize she was not in Detroit. Once I knew she was on a different show I asked, "Did Deiter slip?"

"No, he dropped his pole."

"Why?" My question was based on my own experience on the wire. I'd held the pole and crossed the low wire. I'd even once crossed the ten feet high wire. I didn't understand how he could drop the pole.

"We don't know. We can't ask him what happened."

Deiter dropping his pole caused the entire accident. He shouted, "Ich kann nicht mehr halten," and went down, pulling the other six in the pyramid with him. Over the years Vati theorized that he may have pinched a nerve in his shoulder, making it impossible to continue.

My uncles told me that Vati tried to resurrect the seven that week in Detroit. He counted heads. Producer Al Dobritch, fearing the loss of the high wire act, summoned veteran Wallenda wire walker Gene Mendez. With Gene, Vati counted Uncles Herman and Gunther and himself. Aunt Yetty was on the program with her pole, and could still mount the chair. Mike McGuire and Uncle Arthur made seven. All refused. The accident was too fresh.

That accident ended our traveling community. The Wallenda family never rose to the size it was before the accident. The high wire act consisted of eight or ten people, but including the supporting cast numbered around twenty with several trucks and trailers carrying rigging, and housing personnel. That was our village, our neighborhood, and it was no more.

In 1979, seventeen years after the accident, I finally made it to Detroit with the Great Wallendas high wire act, a troupe of only four, traveling with one truck and trailer. As we crossed the wire with the smaller pyramid, the chair on bicycles, I imagined what had happened in 1962. It was difficult to keep those thoughts out of my mind, which is not recommended thinking during a dangerous act. My respect for Vati increased as I realized how much horror he went through in one night, and for the next sixteen years until he took his final steps on the wire in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on March 22, 1978.

This one incident impacted our family more than anything else. The depression made life difficult, World War II caused problems, the gas shortages of the seventies crimped our way of life, but those things all passed, and later became a cause for laughter around the cocktail table at the house on Arlington Street in Sarasota. The accident in Detroit never left any of us. When we toured in later years, there were times I saw my grandfather demure, sitting alone in a restaurant or pub, and I knew what he was thinking. He was never free from that accident.

Vati had an amazing ability to cover his inner thoughts when it was time to do the show, or to engage the news media. He was bright, cheerful, spontaneous, and displayed a canny sense of humor. He was a joy to watch, learn from, and be around. He, like the other saints of the Wallenda family, is greatly missed. I will never forget this remarkable man, and how he impacted my own life. The act continues today, and many others joined in subsequent years. Many will follow in the future. **BW**

Tragedy at Moslem Temple, January 30, 1962

By Rick Wallenda

This article is creative non-fiction because in a few instances I have speculated what members of the Great Wallendas were thinking that night in Detroit. I have, of course, no way of knowing their thoughts, but I believe what I have written is a close approximation based on my knowing the principals and my own experiences on the high wire.

The news came like a tsunami: The Seven fell. The act was working for Al Dobritch at the Moslem Shrine Circus in Detroit when something went wrong, and the trick came crashing down. I didn't know or understand who was hurt, and who was okay. I wanted to be sure I'd see my mother again. All I knew was that she left me behind for school, and she went on the road doing high wire. I didn't realize she had her own act, and wasn't in Detroit.



The Great Wallendas on the Beatty-Cole Circus in 1961. Back row, left to right, Karl Wallenda, Paul Jordan, Johnny Jordan, Herman Wallenda, Mario Wallenda, and Dick Faughnan. Front row, left to right, Patsy Jordan, Jana Schepp, and unknown, possibly Marga Kirchard. Fred D. Pfening, Jr. photo, Pfening Archives.

Everyone cried, spoke German rapidly, and explained nothing to me. On the news I saw Vati, Uncle Herman, and Uncle Gunther, but still felt unable to make sense of this crisis. I tried to imagine what happened as I assimilated bits of information. I knew enough about the high wire to put a story together from fragments.

Dieter Schepp's highwire slippers silently slide onto the wire above the Coliseum floor. *These slippers are not as American as my cowboy boots*, he thinks as the soles slap the wire.

A soft, flowing melody, created by the circus orchestra, hushes the audience. The announcement, preparing spectators for the seven-person-pyramid, gives the Wallendas time to arrange people and equipment on the platform for the assembly of the trick. Dieter's mind drifts to an earlier moment in the day.

"I want to find an American wife," he'd told Mario Wallenda. Mario laughed because both his sisters, Karl's daughters, Jenny and Carla, are German.

"What's wrong with German women?"

"They are Communist." They laughed, and Dieter strutted around the building in his Levis and boots. He displayed his newly fitted clothing to the spectators as they entered the seating area in hopes of gaining the notice of a lady. Vendors wandered around offering their services. Dieter drank in the capitalism.

"In Germany we have no Shriners."

"This is the Moslem Temple Shrine Circus, the biggest one of all."

Dieter feels the wire under his feet, and knows every eye is on him. A few days earlier, during the first show, he was filled with a buzzing energy that tightened the grip on the pole in his hands. *I'm more relaxed now*, he thinks as he jostles the pole, making it more comfortable on his palms.

Mario lifts the shoulder bar resting in front of him, twirls it around, and places it on Dieter's shoulders, and the opposite end on his own.

"Alles goot?" he asks Dieter.

"Goot," Dieter cries out into the openness of the Coliseum.

Is he really okay, Mario wonders.

"He said he had a cold or some kind of flu, Papa," he'd told Karl the day before.

"Ve get a doctor when he needs it," Karl said.

Mario thought that would be extreme because Dieter was probably overreacting to the practical joke he and Dick Faughnan played on him. Mario and Dieter were roughly the same age, each about nineteen years old, and Mario wanted to initiate him into the Wallenda troupe. He filled a bucket with snow and tossed it into Dieter's bunk as Dick held the door open.

"Papa doesn't know," Mario told Dick when Dieter complained of feeling ill. "Do you think he's really sick?"

"I don't know. I'll talk to Gunther later."

"Okay, but don't tell Papa what we did."

Mario watched Karl step onto the shoulder bar stretched between him and Dieter, adjust his feet to a comfortable position, and heard him say, "Goot."

Everyone in the pyramid speaks German except Dick. This command he understands, and picks up his pole as Mario cries out, "Ready? Go," signaling Dieter, and their part of the pyramid moves forward onto the wire. They take three steps and stop. Dick walks to his position behind Mario, eyes focusing on his head about twelve inches away.

The Wallendas performing the Seven about 1961. Bottom row, back to front, Karl Wallenda, Paul Jordan, Mario Wallenda, Dick Faughnan; middle row, back to front, Herman Wallenda and Johnny Jordan; top, Patsy Jordan. Don Smith photo, Pfening Archives.



Dick was selected for this position because he was able to keep pace consistently.

The gap widens after the top of the pyramid is in place. Control of this gap between the two smaller pyramids, which form the larger pyramid above his head, is crucial. Dick spent hours walking on the wire behind Mario training for this position.

Dick smiles when he feels the shoulder bar gently slide into position on his shoulders. *I love this job.*

"If you fart now you'll pay later," Dick tells his brother-in-law.

The two are good friends, and Dick expects jokes from Mario, including on the wire. Jenny often frowned on these gags. Dick understood her rigidity as a fall out from growing up under the Nazi's. Mario is American born and loosely influenced by the budding counter culture of James Dean, and Marlon Brando.

Dick is staring at the DT hair comb that Mario adopted. Mario calls it a DA. He could not be compliant, and Dick knew some form of nonconformity was always brewing, but he also trusted Mario. Nothing would endanger the act. He felt the shoulder bar lower to Gunther's shoulders behind him.

Gunther knows everyone in the troupe, how they think, and most important, how they behave after the show. Dick is married to Jenny, and stays home nights. Mario has been in the troupe for several years. Dieter is new.

"Uncle Karl, Dieter has not been feeling well," Gunther consulted the leader of the act. "Mario said something. He said he has a cold, but he's okay." No one is concerned about cold symptoms. Each had done the act with a cold.

"I vatch him."

Gunther had other concerns. His daughter Sandy was home with Edith, his step-mother. Sandy was all that was left from his marriage to Margarita. She had died a few years previously in Mexico City, the result of a fall from one of the smaller aerial routines in the Wallenda family's menu of acts. She died from complications in the hospital, and left Gunther to raise Sandy alone.

"Okay, Papa," he signals Herman that the shoulder bar is in place as he waits for the top of the pyramid to assemble. The bottom tier is in position. Mario and Dieter are already on the wire with Karl standing on their shoulder bar. Dick is behind Mario, connected to Gunther with another shoulder bar.

Gunther makes one last sweep of his mind to clear it of the details of life beyond the high wire. The troupe is about to embark from the platform onto the wire with the seven-person-pyramid. He wants to focus on this task, and not be concerned with Sandy, and his other responsibilities. *Another day at the office*, he thinks, and smiles.

Before Herman steps onto the shoulder bar beneath him, he places a longer shoulder bar on Karl's shoulders. Karl is in front of him waiting for the bar. Herman lowers the hooks onto Karl's shoulders, and straddles the opening below where Gunther and Dick wait. He lowers the hooks onto his own shoulders.

"Alles goot?"

"Goot," Karl responds.

The only position in the pyramid from which every other person is visible is where Herman stands. His responsibility is to signal Gunther if anything goes wrong, or if the two smaller pyramids below separate. Herman signals Gunther, who gives the appropriate command to close or lengthen the gap, or slow down or speed up the walking. Herman can see every balance pole, including the ends of Gunther's. With Herman's experience at that position, nothing can stray far from

normal. Before anything goes astray, Herman signals Gunther, and the pyramid proceeds to safety. *Fifteen years ago ve start mit the seven*, Herman thinks.

Herman looks across the shoulder bar to his younger brother. Karl taught him to walk the wire in Germany, assembled the act that went to Ringling, and created this trick. Karl brought everyone from Germany, including these two newcomers, Dieter and his sister Jana. Karl used the high wire to lead the family, and led Herman to this day.

Karl is watching Dieter, and talks gently to the boy beneath him.

"Dieter, shtang fest halten." Karl reminded Dieter to hold his pole tight.

"Jah, Uncle Karl, alles goot."

With a glance downward, Karl can see every move Dieter makes. Dieter stands rigid as a statue.

He's too stiff.

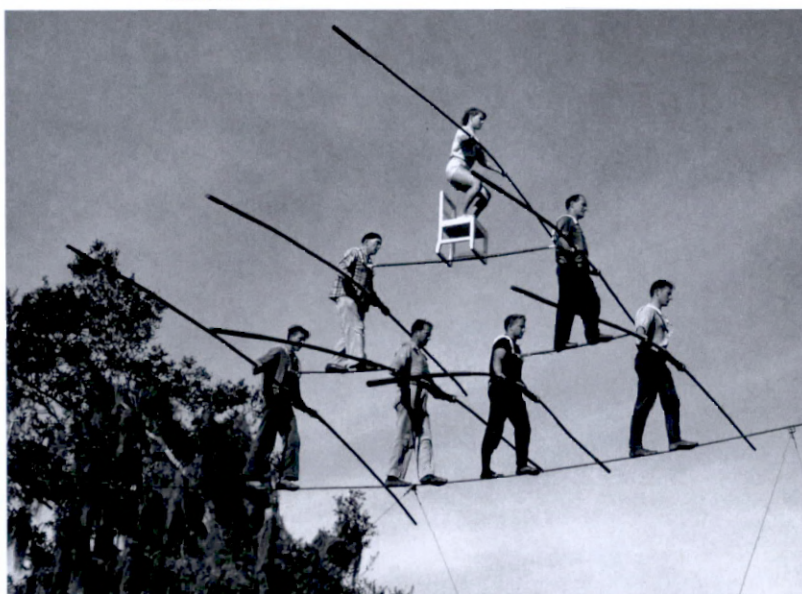
"Schoen [nice]," Dieter hears Karl's voice over the melodic song of the circus orchestra.

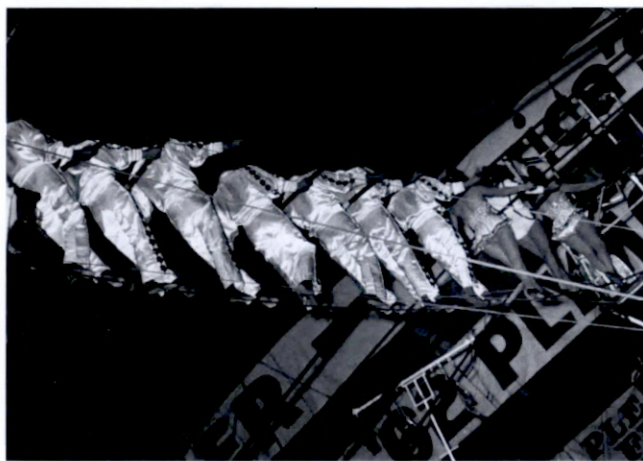
"Fine," Karl says in little more than a whisper. Dieter relaxes his grip enough to allow blood to flow to his fingertips. Everyone in the pyramid feels the calming effect of Karl's voice. The audience, too, is lulled into an unsuspecting calm.

This role for Karl Wallenda was created over decades, since training Herman and Helen for the original pyramid he had used his voice. Joe Geiger had come through the same discipline, and numerous others who had been part of the act had been qualified by Karl's voice. Karl also manipulated the audience using voice commands. Leaving the platform his tone always created calm readiness.

The pyramid is nearly assembled, ready for the final cap, the chair on the shoulder bar with Jana on top. Karl's confidence and pride make this night special. He delighted in being the only act presenting this trick, the signature of The Great Wallendas high wire troupe. Tonight, January 30, 1962, no one will ever forget. He waits for Jana to mount the top bar.

The Great Wallendas practicing the seven person pyramid in Sarasota about December 1961. Bottom row, front to back: Dieter Schepp, Mario Wallenda, Dick Faughnan, Gunther Wallenda; second row, front to back, Karl Wallenda and Herman Wallenda; top, Jana Schepp. Rick Wallenda collection.





The Wallenda act minutes before the horrific accident in Detroit on January 30, 1962. Rick Wallenda collection.

The shoulder bar is in place, and Herman signals "Okay, Jana." She and Jenny alternate. Jenny is on the platform. This show is Jana's turn. First she places her pole over Herman's head, resting it on the bar in front of his face. She will be the seventh person to link into this huge human pyramid half on the wire, the other half still on the platform.

Jana recently arrived from Germany with her brother Dieter. They both had intense practice sessions in Florida prior to leaving. They also had alternates in case there was any question of their abilities.

"Jana, you want me to do the trick this show?" Jenny asks as Jana climbs to her position.

"No, I am okay."

Six months earlier Jana lived in East Germany. The arrangement of papers sends Jana and Dieter to America. Karl's other daughter Carla presents a high wire act with her husband on another show. Jana and Dieter replaced the couple. She nervously climbs to the top, which seems like a pedestal for a queen with six servants carrying her to a prearranged destination—the opposite platform.

"Just like practice," Herman whispers as she climbs over his head.

"Okay," Jana whispers into his ear as she takes the pole in her hand, and stands.

Duetschland var besser, she did not want to leave Germany.

The bar Jana stands on is ten feet above the wire where her brother stands, her head, fifteen feet above the wire below. The wire is forty feet above the floor, and the opposite platform nearly fifty feet away. She gasps slightly as these distances seem to increase with elevated emotions. Jana is the star of the trick, the pinnacle of the final pyramid of the Wallenda high wire troupe.

The shiny green sequins of the costumes on white fabric reflect every spotlight trained on the Seven, a tower of perfection and amazement. Jenny places the chair behind Jana, and she sits down. The pyramid is finally ready for Herman to mount the shoulder bar. Herman gracefully steps from the straddled position to the bar, and lifts his balance pole. The final move to create the gap between Mario and Dick must be executed.

"Ready, one step, go," Herman bellows. Mario and Dieter take one step, and Herman synchronizes the move on his shoulder bar. The gap is opened between the two middlemen. Dick focuses his eyes on the wire at Mario's heels.

"Okay," Herman signals Gunther.

Gunther lifts his pole, and cries out, "Ready, go," and each man, as if one giant organism in a harmony of synchronization, simultaneously lifts a foot, the pyramid gently vibrates, four legs following one another rise, heel first, from the wire, toes still touching. The pyramid rocks forward to begin the fifty feet journey, with one stop in the middle for Jana to display her skill by standing on the chair. At that moment four right toes break contact with the wire, the whole foot sweeping in an arc around the left foot, still flat on the wire supporting the entire weight of the pyramid, each leg in a slow, deliberate motion, a ballet in the air, "Easy out," Gunther cries knowing that vocalization is as much for the audience as it is for the troupe, adding a second dimension, an auditory sensation, to the fantastic visual image the audience receives. The right toe makes contact with the wire first, then the entire foot to the heel, until the left foot is free to lift and arc around the right, performing the same coordinated movement on the opposite side of the wire. The pyramid is moving.

The wire gently slopes from the pedestal. Slightly below Dick stand Dieter and Mario. Gunther is still on the platform. This drop widens the gap between Mario and Dick. Another few steps and Gunther will be on the slope. Herman adjusts his stand to compensate.

"All clear," Gunther shouts, and the pyramid is completely separated from the platform. From the ground the Hanneford horses hear the signals, which mean nothing to them as they wait to enter the center ring for their performance. They are next. John Herriott stands at the back entrance chatting with George Hanneford Sr., ignoring the act, which for them has become ordinary as they await the final bow of the Wallenda troupe in the ring.

"Are you staying with this show through the spring dates?" Herriott asks.

Hanneford nods as he steadies one of the horses. Every artist understands the importance of quiet respect for the act in performance. He raises his eyes as the pyramid takes another step.

"Come in, in back," Herman signals Dick and Gunther to shorten the gap by taking larger steps. Gunther pushes against the shoulder bar gently with his chest, Dick pulls slightly, and the gap closes in just two steps.

As Dieter crosses the center of the wire, he begins to gradually trek uphill. The pyramid shifts, pushing weight toward the back. Dieter rises on the grade of the wire. Karl rises with the ascent. Gunther feels the pressure coming onto his shoulders. The pyramid is near the stopping point.

"Goot, Dieter," Gunther hears Karl easing Dieter's inexperienced emotions.

"Alles goot, Uncle Karl," Dieter responds, and jostles the pole in his hands.

"Dieter, fest halten [hold on]," Karl rebukes the boy sternly. Gunther feels the ripple come through the pyramid and takes the jolt without resistance.

What was that? Gunther wonders. He dips his pole slightly to compensate. *Everything must be okay in front. The steps are all good. Shoulder pressure is fine.* Gunther runs through his checklist before giving the next command.

"Watch it," Gunther crows as his right foot lands on the wire. This command is for everyone in the pyramid, not for the audience: the caution, the yellow light at the intersection ahead. All the men on the wire take this step with preparedness for the next command, planting the right foot firmly on the wire.

"Halt," Gunther says as his left foot reaches the wire, releasing the word with vigor. Four feet simultaneously come to rest on the wire; the pyramid stops; those on the second level, Jana on top, are also prepared for the inertia to cease, and from all parts of the hu-

man structure is heard, "Okay," "good," "Alles goot," and "fine." Gunther insists on hearing the vocalization, secures his right foot on the wire, and declares, "Good stand," the signal to Jana that everything is okay for her to exhibit her newly acquired skill.

Gunther sees the poles ahead, but not those above. All poles are level.

"Achtung," Karl shouts.

The affect of the vocal element on the audience is captivating. The music is perfectly timed to coincide with the visual. A discreet drum role emerges.

A mother holds her child in a tense grip. Thousands of eyes are on Jana and the Wallenda troupe. Vendors stop for this moment; selling is unimportant. The arena becomes completely silent.

Herriott turns to Hanneford, and whispers, "Listen to that. You could hear a mouse piss on cotton."

Jana places her right foot on the step on one side of the chair. Her pole dips slightly. The peg feels firm.

"Schoen ruech halten," Karl barks into the air above Dieter's head. The members of the troupe know this is Karl's way of drawing the audience still further into the drama. Dieter breathes heavily, and his sweaty palms feel slippery. He sees his alternate, Mike McGuire, on the platform less than fifteen feet away. Mike offered to do the trick tonight because Dieter complained of a cold.

I feel Jana on top, he thinks. She places her other foot on the left peg. A slight ripple trickles down through Karl to Dieter's shoulders. It is no different than practice, but tonight every movement seems much harder. The balance feels more difficult, but it isn't.

"Just like practice, Uncle Karl told me," he whispers, and jostles the pole again to regain his grip.

"Dieter," Karl admonishes. Jana is right in the middle of her trick. She places pressure on both feet, and raises her torso from the sitting position, gliding her back against the lean of the chair until she can sit on it.

Dieter feels sweat running down his face, and feels the heat of the lights more than he expected. *Where did that extra weight come from?* he thinks. *The pyramid feels heavier tonight. Did Uncle Karl use a heavier pole?*

Jana places her feet directly on the seat.

"Shtanga for," Herman reminds her to hold the pole away from her body as she rises on the chair. She leans forward, and pushes on her legs. The chair wobbles slightly as Jana shifts the weight from her posterior to her feet. She controls the chair through her legs, and rises to the full standing position. The audience offers no response.

Jana's eyes rest at least sixteen feet above the wire, which she can't see. Karl's head is the closest object within vision. On the platform Jana sees Fontaine, an apprentice, ready to help disassemble the Seven when they arrive. Below Karl is Dieter, but he is not visible to Jana's eyes.

Dieter's forearms ache from the weight of the pole. *Maybe I have the wrong pole?*

He tries to think of some reason for this weakness. The ache increases and drives up the biceps to his shoulders. Dieter raises his shoulder to relieve cramping.

"Dieter, was ist los mit deir [what is wrong with you]?" Karl immediately demands. The shoulder bar shifts under his feet, sending a ripple back through the pyramid, and up to Jana.

Jana is lowering to the lean of the chair again. All the movements she used to get to the standing position are in reverse motion, until her posterior again rests on the seat, and both feet lie on the bar in front of the chair.

"Fertisch," she shyly alerts Gunther that the trick is finished. Jana has not yet mastered the art of using her voice as part of the drama, and is barely audible.

"Ready?" Gunther's voice thunders through the silence. Everyone is alerted that the pyramid will soon begin the final steps to the platform. Dieter must take several steps and his pole will be over the railings on the platform.

"Go," Gunther shouts. The synchronized ballet of legs, which began on the far pedestal, resumes with one leg of each man standing on the wire arcing around the other.

On the ground Herriott is facing the senior Hanneford as Tommy Hanneford watches the tower of human flesh move in total silence toward the destination. The audience remains hushed.

"Ich can nicht mer halten," Dieter screams. His pole slips from his hands.

"My God, they're coming down," Hanneford says to Herriott as he lays a hand on his shoulder.

Dieter's pole drops to the wire at his feet. Without the pole he cannot balance and support the weight of the pyramid above him. He buckles toward the wire. As his shoulder bar lowers more weight forces him down, pushing his body to the wire.

Karl's feet slide down the shoulder bar as Dieter drops, and the shoulder bar he supports also lowers, causing Jana to slide toward Karl. *Gott ist viln*, Karl thinks as he slides toward Dieter. Jana's

Jana Schepp holds on for dear life as Karl Wallenda, directly above her, and Gunther Wallenda desperately keep her from falling. Seconds later she was dropped into a small mat on the ground. Note shoulder bar by Gunther's feet is about to begin its descent. Rick Wallenda collection.



FRIGID
Partly sunny, cold.
High 12-16, low 4-8.
Hourly Temperatures:
7:00 A.M. 12°
8:00 " 10°
9:00 " 9°
10:00 " 8°
11:00 " 7°
12:00 " 6°
1:00 P.M. 5°
2:00 " 4°
3:00 " 3°
4:00 " 2°
5:00 " 1°
6:00 " 0°
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9:00 " -3°
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The Detroit Free Press

METRO FINAL
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EXTRA
Eight Cents

Wednesday, Jan. 31, 1962

On Guard for 130 Years

Vol. 131—No. 272

Two Aerialists Die in Plunge

4 ON HIGH WIRE FALL AT SHRINE CIRCUS

A Grab for Life . . .

BY DON GERVASE AND RILEY MURRAY
Free Press Staff Writers

Two members of the famous high-wire Wallenda troupe were killed and three others were injured Tuesday night when they fell 35 feet before 7,000 horrified spectators at the Shrine Circus at the State Fair Coliseum.

Richard Faughnan, 29, was killed in the spectacular fall. He died of a skull fracture. Dieter Schepp, 23, who fell from the wire during his first public performance on it, died early Wednesday in Highland Park Hospital. Admitted to the hospital were Mario Wal-

lenda, 22, in critical condition with head injuries; Schepp's sister, Jana, 17, suffering head injuries and shock, and Karl Wallenda, who suffered a pelvic injury.

Three members of the troupe grabbed the wire as they fell and were not injured.

Some of the crowd panicked when the accident occurred, but circus performers rushed into the arena and quickly restored order.

The troupe was in the middle of its act when the accident occurred. The aerialists were balanced on the wire in a pyramid when the lead man on the wire, Dieter Schepp, lost his footing and fell.

The head of the troupe, Karl Wallenda, told police that Schepp had complained to other members of the group of being ill, but had said nothing to him.

Wallenda said Schepp shouted, "I can't hold any more," just before he fell.

He added that Tuesday night's performance was Schepp's first in public with the troupe. Faughnan and Mario Wallenda tumbled from the wire behind him.

Gunther, Karl and Herman Wallenda grabbed the high wire as they flew by.

Miss Schepp was sitting in a chair at the top of the pyramid, 53 feet above the arena floor, when the men fell beneath her.

The three grabbed Miss Schepp as she flew by and held her until ring attendants could get a net under them.

Then they dropped the young woman to the net, climbed to the high wire and walked to safety.

MISS SCHEPP hit the net, but bounced out striking her head on the concrete floor.

The flying Wallendas are one of the most famous family circus acts in circus history. They are noted for coming up with more daring acts each circus season.

Many women and children in the audience left the arena, some of them weeping, after the accident.

Gene Randow, 46, who was waiting in the wings to go on with the other clown, said the troupe came down "like coco-nuts falling from a tree."

"I never saw anything like it," he said.

Jenny Faughnan, 25, wife of Richard, and daughter of Karl Wallenda, was standing on a platform at one end of the wire. She gave this account of what happened:

"Dieter had the balancing poles on his fingers and I noticed before he yelled that he couldn't hold any longer. He threw the pole in the air and to grip it in the center and balance. This threw everybody else off balance and down they went."

Also on the platform were Fontaine Kinkaid, 19; Mike McGuire, 24, and Marty Boode, 22.

Mrs. Faughnan collapsed when she was told of her husband's death. Dr. Kenner Ballland Park General Hospital.

Karl Wallenda injured his left leg coming down from the wire and was treated at the same hospital.

The Wallendas were the only act performing when the tragedy occurred. They were performing over the center ring of the three-ring circus.

O. C. Hansen, 50, of 172 W. Margaret, who was attending the show with his wife, said there was a "breathless gap" from the crowd as the bodies swooshed with a thud.

Hansen said the troupe had begun to move after Miss Schepp completed her act on the chair.

"SUDDENLY THERE was a slight loss of balance," Hansen said.

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Struggling Jana Schepp was held safely on the high wire . . .

IT MADE--AND KILLED--AN AERIALIST The Tragic Trail of Love

BY RILEY MURRAY
Free Press Staff Writer

Richard Faughnan had two loves--the circus and a beautiful woman.

And it was the love of both that brought him to the high wire from which he

plunged to death Tuesday night.

All his life Faughnan, 29, wanted to be a circus performer.

That desire drove him to attend every circus that

came near his home town of Springfield, Mass.

He worked selling popcorn and balloons and programs just to be near the circus.

WHEN HE WAS 14, Faughnan met pretty Jenny Wallenda, who became his second love.

She was a bareback rider in a horse act with the Ringling Brothers Circus.

Jenny was also the daughter of the circus' high wire star, Karl Wallenda.

Faughnan told Jenny of his love of the circus, how



. . . Finally dropped free after net was stretched below performers.

Photo by O. C. Hansen

The fall made headlines around the country the next day. The Detroit Free Press gave the accident front page coverage in its January 31, 1962 edition. Pfening Archives.

weight combined with that of her pole and the chair pushes Karl. He holds his pole for balance as the bar below his feet collapses.

"Never let go of the pole," he told all the people he trained. "Balance is with the pole." He holds the pole until there is nothing below his feet.

Dieter reaches a feeble hand for the wire, but the inertia from the weight moving forward is too much, and the wire brushes past his hands. He watches the platform where safety was a mere six feet away, float by like a helium balloon, and grasps only the air.

Dieter's mind is caught away by thoughts of growing up in East Germany, and his mother Lotte. He sees her, Good bye, Mama. His



Mario Wallenda in Detroit's Harper Hospital soon after his fall. Don Smith photo, Pfening Archives.

childhood home, the street they lived on, and Jana; all his memories are a motion picture in his mind.

Mario, connected to Dieter, is pulled by the force now moving downward and forward. Karl hovers in front of Mario, the shoulder bar still connected to him, but Mario's bar is falling away. Dieter's balance pole lumbers on the wire momentarily, and spins off the side, spraying chips of blue paint in the air, and falls with Dieter.

Mario clutches his own pole, as he was trained to do, the wire firm beneath his feet. He watches this spectacle in disbelief. *What has gone wrong?* His mind short-circuits. *This was never rehearsed.* The shoulder bar resting on Karl's shoulders is pulled off, and falls toward Mario.

Behind Mario, Dick stands sturdy and firm. He cannot see beyond Mario, but he hears the sound of steel poles and human flesh colliding with steel wires, an unpleasant and unfamiliar sound. Above Dick, Herman is pulled forward by the inertia. Dick feels the shift of weight, and sees Jana's chair come into his peripheral vision from above. The chair strikes Mario on the head, driving him down. Karl and Jana appear before his eyes.

Karl is falling with his legs apart, Jana floating with her pole, her arms waving. Dick realizes the pyramid is collapsing, and clutches his pole.

The pole is life, he remembers Karl saying.

John Herriott turns to see bodies falling, tumbling through the air from the high wire. No one is recognizable; everyone is a blur. Two figures are already in the air below the wire. Others are still above, but the pyramid is chaotic, and in a condition that no longer resembles the feature of the Wallenda act.

Oh my God.

Herriott, the Hannefords, and others stand in helpless bewilderment, as they watch their friends plummet to the ground. One by one they are knocked from the wire to drop like stones into an abyss: Dieter almost to the ground in center ring, Mario falling limply, and Dick trying to stay erect as Herman falls forward onto him.

Dick feels Herman's pole smash into his head, and Herman's weight on top.

There goes Mario. I'm next if I can't... His thoughts are cut off. The concussion sends Dick to his knees, but there is nothing to land on. The force propels Dick further down, past the wire, the only life line left, the last hope of averting disaster, Dick falls through the mass of balance poles, shoulder bars, and guy wires.

My pole. It's ripped from his hands. In a last effort he reaches for the wire, misses and plunges down.

Karl feels a stinging in his groin, as the wire sinks into the flesh between his legs, and feels an impact on his back pressing him further into the wire. Grasping hands feel the cold steel of the cable, and the power of adrenalin swiftly wraps fingers, arms, and legs around everything. In a miracle Karl has saved his life, and at the same time, he grabs his falling niece, and spares her for the moment.

Herman falls into an entanglement of hardware on the wire where Dick and Mario stood, and grabs enough to stop the inertia, but bangs his head. He is dangling among all the poles, and at least one shoulder bar.

Mein kopf [my head]. Herman feels the pain on his forehead, but can't release a hand to touch the point of pain. Gunther watches everyone cinematically fall from the positions he directed them into moments before. The shoulder bar lifts as gracefully from his shoulders as it had been placed there, and the weight is gone.

For an instant everything comes to a stop. The sound of poles clanging, banging into each other, shoulder bars slamming guy wires and catching, bodies smashing into the ground, costumes tearing, ends abruptly. It is a merciful silence.

Gunther is left standing on the wire. *My God, what happened?* His father, uncle, and cousin cling to the wire before him. A quick count reveals three missing: Dick, Mario and Dieter are flaccid on the ground.

Jana begins screaming hysterically, screeching through the silent auditorium, and clinging to Karl's back. Karl rolls and hangs from the wire by one knee and a hand, with the other holding his niece. The young woman pulls, claws, and struggles, nearly prying Karl's grip free. Dozens of Shriners and performers scramble to the ring, stepping over bodies bleeding on the yellow ring mat where the Hanneford bareback riders will perform next. The stunned spectators begin to weep and sob.

Jenny collapses on the platform above. Jana shrieks uncontrollably.

"Dad, are you alright?" Gunther asks his father.

"What? I don't know."

"Your bleeding, can you make it to the platform?"

"Jah." Herman's powerful hands grasp the wire, and hand over hand he moves toward the platform, hanging beneath the wire.

Two days after the accident the invincible Karl Wallenda went back on the wire. This photo was taken as the announcement was being made that he was returning to the act. Left to right, Gene Mendez, Herman Wallenda, Karl Wallenda, Mike McGuire and Gunther Wallenda. Don Smith photo, Pfening Archives.



"I'm going to help Uncle Karl." Gunther steps over his father and the poles and bars piled like debris, obstructing his path. He bends to assist Karl with Jana.

"Fontaine," Mike breaks the silence on the opposite platform, "can you make it down the ladder?" She nods, but can't tear her eyes from the spectacle. "I'm going to help Jenny."

On the ground Herriott, and Tommy Hanneford run to the ring to offer assistance. Jana is screaming and clutching to Karl, Gunther frantically trying to help.

"We need a net," someone on the ground shouts. Others are shouting for medical help, and gathering around the fallen performers laying limp in the ring, Dieter at one end, Dick at the other, and Mario in the middle. Herriott steps tentatively around the bodies, friends with whom he has shared coffee, and cut up jackpots. They are inert in the ring in which his camels have just danced.

Shriners are running into the ring. Hanneford lifts a mat he uses for padding in a dive over his horse.

"Can we catch her on this?" He offers it to some of the performers standing beneath Jana. The men quickly grab the edges of the pad no larger than a small army cot holding it horizontally under Jana and Karl.

"Karl, drop her into the mat," someone shouts.

Jana becomes wild, shouting, "Don't drop me," but Karl can no longer hold her. She sinks her nails into his skin like a cat deter-

The show must go on. As Gene Mendez watches from the pedestal, a triumphal Karl Wallenda stands on the chair as his nephew Gunther on front bike and brother Herman on rear bike peddle across the wire shortly after the fall. Rick Wallenda collection.

mined to hold on, but Karl's grip is getting weak. As the men below prepare, Karl tries to convince Jana to drop into the pad. She cries wildly, fighting, hysterically clinging to Karl.

"I don't want to die," she looks down at her brother lying in a pool of blood. She fears the kind of death she sees below. Her Communist concept of the finality of death makes her life meaningless.

"I don't want to die," she screams, the hand-held pad looks like a postage stamp.

Gunther and Karl finally pry her hands loose, and pitch her toward the ground, her only means of saving her life. She plunges, staring at the pad below, thinking of the school she attended in East Germany, the Darwinian ideology freshly emerging from her subconscious, this meaningless death awaiting her on that pad below. Jana's feet strike the pad, ripping it loose from the grasp of the men on one side, and she tumbles to the ground beside the men. She is unconscious but alive. She survives the fall.

"Tommy, we have to stay under Karl until he gets to the pedestal," Herriott urges. Hanneford agrees.

"My God, look at Dick," Hanneford exclaims.

"We can't do anything about him. Watch Karl." Some first aid people arrive with a stretcher, the only one available, and begin to place Mario on it. The others lay still, waiting for more emergency personnel to arrive.

"Ambulances have been called," a nurse tells the Shriners.

The pandemonium in the ring confuses Karl. He couldn't see where the other boys were.

"Uncle Karl, climb to the platform," Gunther tells him.

"Jah, but my leg hurts."





Recent photo of Mario Wallenda. Rick Wallenda photo.

"Fest halten [hold on]," Gunther repeated the message so often given him.

Karl slides along the wire, hanging by his hands and one knee, the other leg sagging in pain.

I make it, he repeats to himself with each grasp of his hand. *Mario, God, Mario*. He thinks first of his son lying on the ground. Only fragments of complete thoughts emerge, the pain in his groin increases. *I make it*.

Jana is lying with the others. Knocked unconscious by the impact, she is lifeless. *Jana, Dieter*, more fragments, *Dick, Mario, God, Mario*. Four bodies in the ring, dozens of others running, yelling for help, Shriners, artists, prop men, and a nurse—all helpless.

Karl reaches for the rope hanging below the platform that can lower him to safety, but he can hold his weight no longer. Gunther stands on the edge of the platform and reaches a hand to Karl.

"Uncle Karl, you can't make it down the rope. I'll help you down the ladder."

Karl reaches for Gunther's hand. Between them there is enough strength to pull Karl's aching body from the wire.

"I make it," Karl says to Gunther.

"Are you sure?"

Karl lies there a moment, eyes closed, gasping for air, and rests his leg for a second. He is the last to make it off the wire.

"Uncle Karl?"

"Jah, okay, the boys, Jana, ve get down."

"I'll go first and help you. We have to get down safely."

"Jah," was all Karl could muster. Gunther helped him to his feet, and disappeared down the ladder. Karl followed slowly. As Karl's feet touch the ground his eyes latch onto Mario on the stretcher as they carry him away.

"Mario, God, Mario." Gunther wraps his arm around Karl for support. Karl wobbles into the ring, past Dieter, and then Dick.

"Mein Gott, whats happen." Karl is sobbing.

"Mr. Wallenda, we have to get you on a bed in the First Aid room until we can get you to a hospital."

"I get to help the boys."

"Uncle Karl, go lie down. You can't do anything here."

They both stop when they hear Jenny screaming, "Dick, no, Dick, wake up." Mike holds her and others prevent her from entering the ring to see Dick. She is unharmed, but hysterical.

My Dick, I need you. You can't go now. Jenny thinks of her two kids, Tino and Delilah from her first marriage. *I can't do this alone.*

"Dick," she screams.

"Jenny, let the nurse do what she can." Mike tightens his grip. Jenny is kept from entering the ring, and from Dick's side.

"Dad, are you okay?" Gunther asks Herman again.

"Jah, but I hit my head." There is a gash creasing the bridge of his nose.

"Let's get you two to First Aid," a Shriner tells them.

Karl embraces his older brother, the only one in the troupe who has been on the wire with him since they started the act in Germany almost forty years earlier. Karl is sobbing on his brother's shoulder.

"What's happen?" he asks the senior Wallenda as they head toward a corridor.

"Tommy, I heard someone say Dick is dead," Herriott says as they step out of the ring.

"Dieter looks bad too. Mario was coughing, but they all look bad. I have to get the horses ready." The Hanneford troupe is next on the program.

"Tommy, it might be a while before they get them out of there." Dieter and Dick lie in their blood on the yellow ring mat.

"The ambulance is here," Tommy said.

The medical personnel arrive with another gurney. They check both men, and lift Dieter to the stretcher. Dick is left alone on the ground below the high wire rigging. Shriners gather around him to prevent spectators from gawking.

Hanneford is restless, and the horses stir as they sense something is amiss.

"We go in there and do our act," the senior Hanneford tells his family.

"How are we going to do our act with all that blood in there?" Three pools of blood mark the yellow canvas mat covering the brown of the dirt. Some of the blood ran into the dirt leaving stains. Red patches of dirt spot the edges of the mat, Dick still lying without movement.

"We'll work," Mr. Hanneford demands, "as soon as Dick is out of there. These people paid, we'll finish the show for them."

Another twenty minutes pass before the last ambulance arrives. They are in no hurry. They collected Dick from the center ring. The ringmaster blows his whistle.

"On with the show," he announces.

As the years pass, and my own high wire career established, I realize the impact of that accident on the family. We continue on the high wire, tour, and I even participated in the recreation of the trick more than once, but that event never left our minds or hearts. We miss the lost, and Uncle Mario, cantankerous and gruff, is still lovable. The high wire remains the backbone of the family, and serves me well to this day. The next generation rises, and soon they will make their mark. This wonderful tradition lives on in the high wire on shows all over the world. The legacy of all the saints of the family now gone, those of us still on the wire, and the future in the hands of the next generation, promises thrills to come, but I hope no more accidents. **BW**

After the Detroit Tragedy

By Faye Braathen

The following article was written in early March 1962 by Faye Braathen, wife Madison, Wisconsin circus fan Sverre O. Braathen. The Braathens were friends of Karl and Helen Wallenda. This account appears to have been sent to friends who shared their affection and sympathy for the great wire walking family after the fall in Detroit on January 30, 1962. It discusses a party held in the Wallendas' honor in Madison on February 26, and Helen's March 3 response to a letter Faye sent her about the banquet. The manuscript, a copy of Faye's letter, and the original of Helen's letter are part of the Sverre O. Braathen papers in Milner Library at Illinois State University. The Braathens maintained a remarkably wide correspondence with showfolks, and their letters are a largely unmined resource for scholars. Thanks to Maureen Brunsdale and Mark Schmitt of Milner for making this documentation available. It is published here in a slightly edited form.

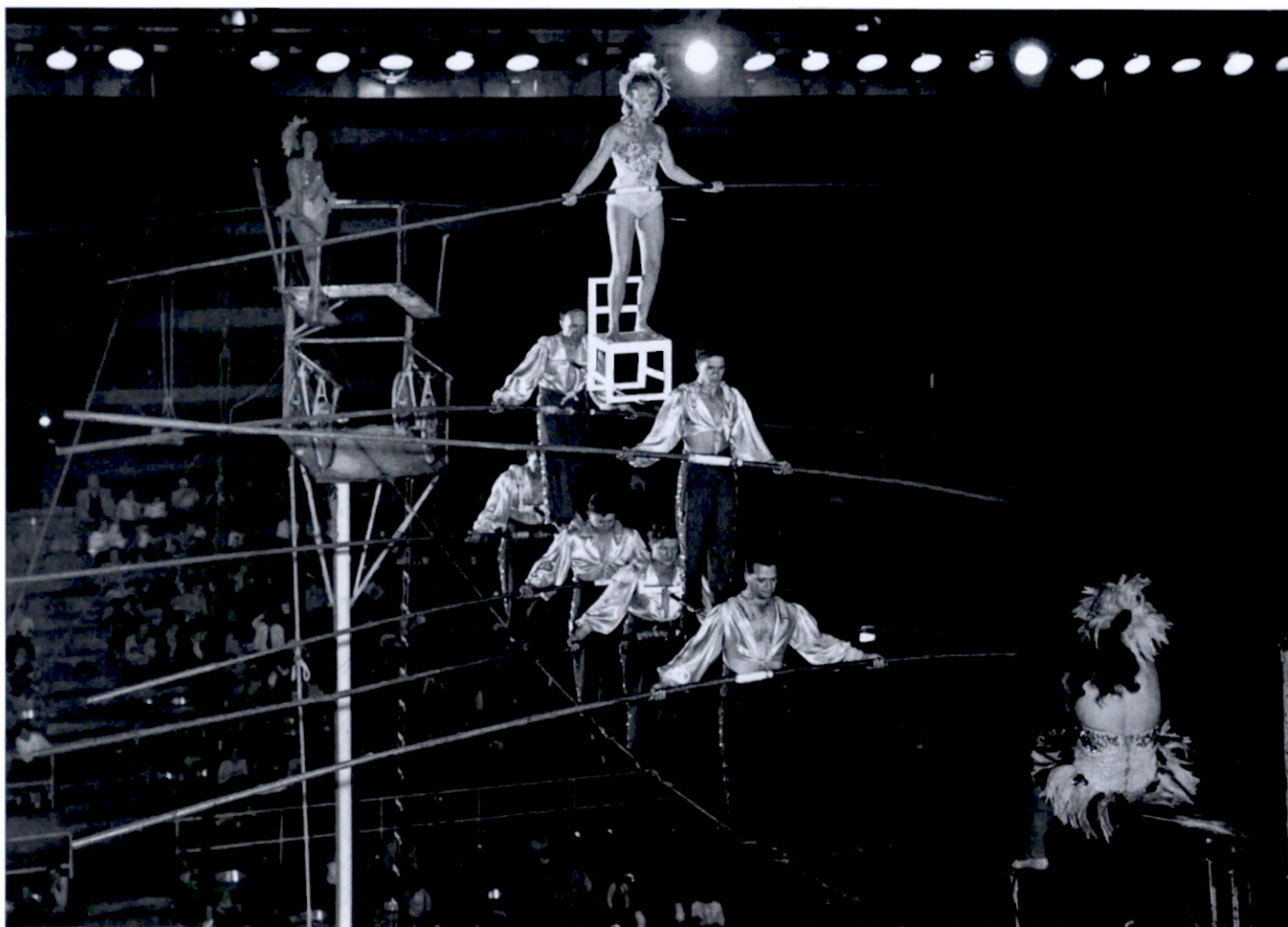
We have known Karl and his wife Helen since their first summer in this country—1928. Helen was then only seventeen and not yet Mrs. Wallenda. They were both born in Germany, and Helen was the first to master English. It was not long before we persuaded her to write us, assuring her that her phonetic spelling was entirely acceptable and that we believed by writing her friends she would acquire a broader vocabulary. We have all their letters, and at various times I've read excerpts from

them over the radio with her permission. She finally gave me blanket permission, saying, "My letters have never needed a censor, have they?" She and Karl are most observant, and their letters, written always by Helen, from various parts of the world are rich in comments regarding social and economic conditions in various countries. Her description of a bull fight she reluctantly witnessed in Mexico is a riot.

Helen was for many years the top mounter in the human pyramid that has made their act so famous, but in recent years she has left this to her blond daughter Carla. Now Carla has married into another high wire act which this winter is appearing in the Fernandez Circus in Hawaii. This accounts for the fact that Karl's act included his niece Jana Schepp, who after much negotiation he managed to get out of East Berlin. She was the top mounter that fateful night in Detroit. It was her twenty-three year old brother Dieter who lost his grip on the forty pound balancing pole and caused the seven-person pyramid to fall, causing his own death along with Karl's son-in-

The local Wallenda Tent of the Circus Fans Association sent the Wallendas flowers when they appeared in Madison, Wisconsin with Ringling-Barnum for the last time on August 22, 1946. Left to right, Karl and Helen Wallenda, Faye Braathen, circus fan W. L. Jackman, Herman Wallenda and Joe Geiger. Sverre Braathen slide, Milner Library Special Collections, Illinois State University.





The Wallendas perform the Seven at Comstock Arena on Long Island on the Beatty-Cole Circus in 1961. Bottom row, front to back, Dick Faughnan, Mario Wallenda, Paul Jordan, Karl Wallenda; middle row, front Johnny Jordan, rear Herman Wallenda; Patsy Jordan on top. Jenny Wallenda stands above the bicycles on platform on left. Bill Mitchell photograph, Pfening Archives.

law Richard Faughnan, and for Mario Wallenda to be so terribly injured.

When in 1935 we organized the local tent of our national Circus Fans Association, we chose to name it for the Wallendas—a fact that has made them very proud through the years and which has been increasingly a source of pride to our tent members as the Wallenda star as ascended ever higher in the circus firmament. They were on Ringling-Barnum for nineteen years and after 1929 were always among the guest at our circus parties. Since they left the Ringling show they have always stopped over with us whenever they chanced to be passing through Madison. So we've become like brothers and sisters. They always introduce us as their "oldest friends in America." They became American citizens long ago and put us native born to shame, so intelligently patriotic and deep-down grateful are they for their citizenship in this most "wonderful of all countries in the whole world."

When we learned they would be going to Minneapolis to appear in the Shrine Circus, we wrote them and asked if they would again stop over with us for whatever time they could allot to us. Before

their reply came the radio brought the tragic, and for us heartbreaking, news of the terrible disaster in Detroit. We were looking forward to meeting Jana and Dieter Scheep and seeing again Karl's daughter Jenny, whose husband was killed, Mario, and the rest of the troupe.

Mario is Helen's brother's son. His mother died at his birth and a few years later his father Philip Kreis was struck and killed by a hit-and-run driver as he changed a tire beside the road. Karl and Helen adopted this child and he developed in to a handsome, curly-haired blond lad with lots of talent and a zest for living. He is now twenty-two.

We telephoned them as soon as possible and wrote letters. When they reached Cleveland for a Shrine Circus appearance, Karl was more in command of himself and expressed the desire to meet the members of the tent here. Several are new since last he met with us. Several of the people in the news media had importuned Bex [her husband's nickname] to arrange for interviews, so he asked Karl if he cared to grant such. His reply: "I've been doing so in Detroit and Cleveland, so why shouldn't I in my second home town?" Show people know the wisdom of retaining the good will of press radio and TV.

So we arranged for a testimonial dinner at our finest steak house, the Simon House, which chances to be owned by one of our tent members, Deane Adams. Deane very graciously allotted a room for these interviews so we could be assured of no encroachment on the dinner itself. Thirty-two people made reservations.



The Wallenda troupe in 1928, their first year on Ringling-Barnum. Bottom row, front Joe Geiger, rear Herman Wallenda; Karl Wallenda on chair with Helen Kreis on his shoulders. Pfening Archives.

Karl and the two girls now in the troupe (not relatives) left Cleveland after the Sunday matinee and drove until they ran into ice at 1:00 a. m. at Janesville, forty-five miles from here, and wisely spent the balance of the night there. Karl telephoned us at 11:00 a. m. from the motel in Madison where we had arranged reservations for them. We drove in and took them to lunch. We avoided any mention of the accident, for Karl looked haggard, worn and wan. After a few desultory remarks Karl looked at us and said, "You are being very kind and not talking about our accident. At first I tried to run from it, but one night in Detroit I said to myself, 'Now look here, Karl Wallenda, you can never really run from this. Better get yourself in hand and answer all questions as best you.' And you that has helped me and it's helping Herman and Helen and everybody." To us that seems good psychology. But we already knew most of the details so we were soon talking of happier things.

Herman had helped to tear down in Cleveland, so he did not arrive here until 2:00 p. m. We all took naps, and at 4:00 we drove the four of them to the Simon House that Karl's interview might be out of the way before the dinner hour. The press was most tactful and asked Karl for no gory details or other distasteful things. Karl and Herman were frank in giving information regarding their family and their seven-generation-long circus history, their coming to America, etc. Many pictures were taken and the next day good articles appeared in both papers, together with pictures, and our favorite radio columnist, Betty Cass, gave her thirty minute program to telling of them and their feats and their characters.

At 6:30 we all tramped in to a private dining room where a delectable meal was served—prime ribs of beef cooked as an English chef would have prepared them, and everything to accompany them.

Because we have known them longest, it fell of Bex to be toastmaster. Karl had suggested that instead of a set speech he answer questions and Bex so announced. Bex then introduced Karl by telling how John Ringling signed the act in Cuba the winter of 1927-1928, and asked Karl to tell of their opening night in Madison Square Garden where they stopped the show cold, being accorded a twenty-eight minute ovation—the longest in Ringling history. This put Karl at ease, for naturally he could take justifiable pride in relating how they were thus catapulted to stardom. He next assured the new members of our tent that he valued their presence quite as much as that of those he had known through the years, that he and the troupe were very proud to have a tent in C. F. A., etc. Then, as his voice faltered, he thanks us for the flowers the tent sent to Sarasota for the double funeral and told how Helen, who had accompanied the mourners home, saved the ribbon streamer from this sheaf, with the words Wallenda Tent across it. She brought this back to Detroit that Karl, Herman and Gunther, who had remained to carry on wit the show, might see it. Helen took it back to Jenny when she returned to Florida to care for the injured and grieving ones there.

Then questions were asked and Karl and Herman answered each fully and frankly. Soon Karl's delightful sense of humor was asserting itself and he had us laughing, and after a time, he himself could laugh. I watched him carefully during the hour he talked and could actually see him uncoil and relax for the first time since that fateful January night he later told us.

In all the years we've known them it was the first time pretty, blond, blue-eyed Helen has not been with Karl on a festive occasion, and we all missed her. So after dinner we placed a long distance call to Sarasota and each of us who know her talked with her briefly with Karl chatting several minutes. He told us later that she had broken down and wept when he took the phone and he could not leave her in tears, even though they were largely tears of gratitude for what we had done for her family.

We stopped briefly at the home of Hallie Olstadt, our tent president, and had a cup of coffee. Then we drove them back to their motel for they were in need of sleep. Mario had that day undergone exploratory surgery in Detroit, and the message that he can never again walk came just as they were about to sleep. We were glad Karl had not known this terrible truth when he talked with Helen. It was best that await the morrow.

The next morning at breakfast Herman half-whispered to us, "Until then we had dared to hope." None of us could discuss the subject and we turned to other topics. They were quickly packed after breakfast, and Karl, driving the car with the two girls, and Herman, driving a second vehicle, followed us from the motel and around Madison to the juncture with the new Interstate highway to Minneapolis. As we left them, we all waved to one another and that had to be our farewell this time for none of us was equal to more. We hoped, perhaps vainly, that the news regarding Mario could be put aside until Karl could get to a phone in Minneapolis, and discuss with Mario's chief surgeon the problems now confronting him. It had cost them \$140.00 per day, but the doctor had told Karl he could now let two of the three special nurses go and that Mario could be transferred to a less expensive room.

The next day I wrote Helen the details of our visit and the dinner, telling her what I should myself like to learn of an occasion I could not attend. She has written a long letter of gratitude, faith and high courage in reply. I shall quote a part of it for you here: "Thank you for your nice letter of February 28th, and the detailed account of the

wonderful dinner you nice people have given to the Wallendas. It's people like you and many other Americans who make Karl and the boys carry on, no matter what has happened.

"Oh, how I wished I could have been there, but as things are, I am taking care of three small children (Carla's) and Jana my niece who also was in the accident and of course the mother of Jana, not to mention my dear mother and Karl's.

"So you see I haven't much time to think, although my thoughts are always with Mario and also my prayers. It's hard to believe that this has happened, but who are we to question God's ways and means; He gives and He takes, and blessed be His name. . . . Perhaps Mario was meant for a better and bigger job? Perhaps someday he makes good in something which he had never dreamed of? Perhaps some day he will be of some service to the human race of some kind, perhaps he was elected to do something, something which he could only find time and patience to do in a wheelchair? We don't know Faye, and in the meantime I just hope, pray and believe that some good will come out of this tragedy.

"So, just please help us and tell everyone you know to write all the get well cards, notes of good luck, and hope for the future to Mario. It will help him to know that there are many good people in this world who are pulling the ropes for him. Will you do this?"

They can not collect under workmen's compensation because they are independent contractors, so this is going to be a long, hard pull for all of them. Fortunately, Karl recently changed agents and now has the one who has done so well for Emmett Kelly, and is hopeful of commanding higher salaries. As the greatest high wire act in the world and one of the all-time great of circusdom they should! The Shriners took up a collection and gave Karl about \$1000 to help with the funerals, but otherwise they have been on their own.

So if you would like to write to Mario or to the Wallendas themselves or send greeting cards to Marion in the hospital you may be assured you will be helping each one of them to keep up their courage and their faith in human kindness and understanding.

Karl told us that he had so drilled into every member of the troupe that in the event of a fall they were each to grab the wire (as all of the older members had done several times) that when he saw the three young members hurdle to the ring below he could scarcely believe his eyes. His mind was intent on catching Jana, who had been in the chair above him, and he told us he knew then and now that if he failed "my mind would leave me." He had to keep her from falling and he did! He caught her by one wrist and she, in panic, fought him until his pain seemed unbearable. Herman's son Gunther did not lose his footing and retained the all important balancing pole. He cautiously made his way toward Karl, talking to him and Herman the while to reassure them, and managed to get hold of Jana's other wrist. Together they held her while Karl instructed the performers and prop men below to hold a mat as an im-

provided net. Then he and Herman counted, that they might drop Jana at the same instant, thereby assuring her falling properly and protecting themselves against being pulled from the wire.

Gunther had only recently returned to work for his lovely and talented Mexican-Spanish wife Marguerita died about two years ago following an accident in Mexico City. She had slipped her safety loop into the wrong notch with the result it gave way and she sustained injuries that prevented her walking—injuries not unlike Mario's now. She lingered for a time, but the doctors could not save her, and Gunther was in deep grief. Herman said to us when they were here, "It was Gunther who saved Karl's and Jana's lives." And Jana has already decided to return to the troupe, much to Karl's relief, for she is the most apt girl pupil he has ever trained, or as he put it, she is "a born performer." **BW**

Lions in winter. Gunther, Helen, Karl and Herman Wallenda pose beneath a painting of John Ringling, their first American boss, at the Ringling Museum during a ceremony to honor them in the early 1970s. Pfening Archives.



Betty Cass Program on the Wallendas

The following is a transcript of a February 27, 1962, broadcast by Betty Cass, a talk show host at WIBA radio in Madison, Wisconsin. Cass had attended the banquet for the Wallendas the previous evening and recounted the event in her broadcast the next day. Original in Sverre O. Braathen papers, Milner Library Special Collections, Illinois State University.

Hi there! As you may have read in the Journal this morning, members of the Madison circus fan's association, known as the Wallenda Tent, gave a dinner party last night at the Simon House to honor and salute Karl and Herman Wallenda, the brothers who head the famous circus family. It was not only a very touching affair, emotionally, but it also produced a great deal of fun, laughter, and many sentimental reminiscences. The brothers, as you remember, were both painfully injured about a month ago in Detroit when their high wire act fell, killing two of the performers and seriously injuring a third. But Herman, the elder, 60, went back into the act the next night and Karl, 57, went back as soon as he could sneak out of the hospital—although he is still now, nearly a month later, suffering with broken bones and other injuries.

And last night you'd never have known it, to listen to them, that anything was wrong. Not because they're callous, either, but because they're courageous and because they know they must set an example for the younger members of their troupe. Mr. and Mrs. Sverre Braathen, Madison's foremost circus fans, who were among the most active members of the local group in arranging the dinner, have been friends of the Wallendas for many years—almost ever since they came here from Germany in 1928. And of course it is to them that the Wallendas feel the closest. So, shortly after the Wallendas arrived in Madison yesterday, Karl said to the Braathens, "You're being kind, not referring to our accident, and we appreciate it. We haven't felt like talking about it before. But we have to live with it, and it'll be better if we can talk about it. So you ask whatever you want to. And when the reporters come, it's all right they ask too."

When you read the stories in today's papers, you'll realize that the Wallendas didn't dodge any questions. When Karl was introduced to the gathering after dinner he first said very seriously, sincerely, that he felt more at home with his friends in Madison than at any place else except at his own home in Sarasota, Florida.

Then he thanked them for the flowers that the Madison group sent to Florida for the services for the two members of the troupe who were killed in the fall. Then, because he's already told Mr. Braathen that he'd rather answer questions than make a speech, he almost visibly threw off the sorrow which must be with him most of the time these days, smiled an ingratiating smile and said, modestly, "Now, let's have the questions."

Incidentally, both Karl and Herman are both surprisingly modest and gentle, with an obvious sweetness of nature. You might think such a profession which calls for so much courage, *hardness*, really, and with so much world-wide acclaim, that they might be vain and arrogant. But not at all. And their obvious devotion to each other was a nice thing to see, too. Herman is the elder by three years, but Karl is always spoken of as the leader of the group. *Life* magazine—February 9th issue—reporting on the Detroit accident said, "Karl was always the leader. He was the central brain of the fantastic organism with 28 arms and legs moving in perfect balance with poles swaying like the antennae of a giant insect." But if Karl is the leader, he seems to feel a comfortable confidence that his older brother is right there, backing him up in everything he does and says. And humorously, too, most of the time.

Last night, while Karl was answering questions, he'd make a statement of fact or figure of which he wasn't quite sure. Then he'd glance

Magnificent poster for the Wallendas appearance at Berlin's Winter Garten in January 1938. Unus, the great hand balancer, was also on the bill. Sverre O. Braathen collection, Milner Library Special Collections, Illinois State University.





The Braathens and the Wallendas were friends for forty years. This 1935 photo shows, left to right, Karl Wallenda, Helen Wallenda, Faye Braathen, and Henrietta Kreis, Helen's sister, better known as Yetty Wallenda. Sverre O. Braathen photo, Milner Library Special Collections, Illinois State University.

ly, I'm sure. I'm three years older than you are. I remember better. Besides she was born in February 1878."

Herman also heckled Karl in a gently good-natured way, now and then. Once when someone asked if circus performers are treated with greater respect in Europe, more as though they were artists, like singers or concert musicians, Karl said, "Yes, they are." Herman immediately said in his quiet little voice, "But they aren't paid as much there as they are in America." Every now and then, when there would be a pause, Karl would say, "Are there any more questions?" and Herman would pipe up meekly, "Yes, when's pay day?"

Among the interesting incidents which Karl told about was a day when the troupe was playing in Nicaragua and his wife Helen, who was still playing with them said to him, while they were up on the high wire, "Stop shaking the wire." He said he wasn't shaking the wire. Then he said, "Then we look over at the platform and it is shaking like it is blowing in the wind. We cross the wire and when I looked down, all the people are running and screaming. It's a big earthquake! When we get down, there are cracks in the ground and the wire up there behind us is all gone slack."

He also said that when the tragic Ringling circus fire in Hartford, Connecticut, which took 168 lives, broke out, they were right in the middle of their act on the high wire. They saw the fire start as a very tiny flame and thought the fireman, who was always with the circus, would have it out in a minute. So they went on with the act. But because it was wartime, there was a manpower shortage. The firemen were not the trained firefighters the circus had always had before, but untrained roustabouts who panicked also. Even so, he said everyone could have gotten out safely if so many people hadn't panicked and mistook the animal chutes for exits and tried to get out that way.

Herman, whose memory their early days in Europe are naturally better than Karl's, told about what he called "arena" type circuses which were common in Europe at that time—especially in Germany and Belgium. He said they were more like vaudeville shows—no animals, just human acts. They'd come to town, smaller towns usually, set up their equipment in the market place or the town square, and give performances in the open. Sometimes, if there was a circus performing in a tent,

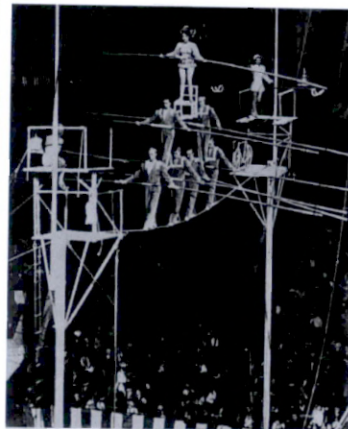
over at Herman. If Karl was right, Herman would just smile and nod quietly. If Karl was wrong, Herman would correct him good-naturedly. For example, when Karl said that their mother, who was a member of the troupe in Germany and who is now living with them in Sarasota, is 82 years old, Herman immediately said, "She's 84." Karl said, "Are you sure?" Herman said, "Certain-

or, as was more common then, in a building in the town, the open air circus would set up business immediately in front of the entrance of the big show. And, of course, since there was no way for the owner of the open air circus to collection admission from all of the spectators who watched them, many of the people who came to see the indoor show would never get past the outdoor show. But, if the arena show as good, if the customers liked it, most of them would pay voluntarily. Sometimes, they wouldn't pay until the end of the show; sometimes the arena circus owner would pause just before they began the big act and suggest to the audience that if they had liked it so far, that they pay. They often made more money than the big show inside.

And, Herman added, many of the finest circus performers in the world were developed in these arena type shows where there were no animals, where everything depended on human skill and daring.

I took my tape recorder with me to the dinner, turned it on between Karl and Herman when they began to talk and recorded much of the conversation. There was considerable background noise, however, such as applause, laughter, wise-cracks, even soft circus music, so, I'm going to have to edit that out of the tape before we use it. In the meantime, the evening was certainly one of the high spots in the circus history of Madison, even of Wisconsin, and with Wisconsin being the mother of more than 40 circuses, including the Greatest Show on Earth, that's saying a great deal. And Mr. and Mrs. Sverre Braathen and the other member of the Wallenda Tent are to be complimented for their part in it. **BW**

Letter from Karl Wallenda to Evelyn Joyce Cook, widow of Ringling-Barnum lawyer Frank Cook, in response to her condolences after the accident in Detroit. Pfening Archives.



The Great Wallendas

1623 ARLINGTON STREET
SARASOTA, FLORIDA

Mrs. Evelyn Joyce Cook
50 West 77th Street
New York City 24, N. Y.

Dear Evelyn,

Our entire Wallenda family and troupe would like to express our deep appreciation for your sympathy and concern. It is comforting to us to know that you share our grief for our loved ones.

It is heartwarming and encouraging to receive so many wonderful messages from our friends.

Best personal wishes.

Very sincerely,

Karl Wallenda

THE GREAT WALLENDAS

A Conversation with Struppi Hanneford

The following conversation with Struppi Hanneford took place in her palatial motor home on the grounds of the Eastern States Exposition, the Big E, on October 1, 2011. The other participants included CHS board members Maureen Brunsdale, Chris Berry, and Fred Pfening; and Greg Parkinson, former director of Circus World Museum. The recording of the visit was transcribed by Kate Browne, and edited by Mort Gamble.

Born Gertrude Zimmerman in Germany in the 1930s, Struppi Hanneford came to the United States in 1953 as part of the Luvass Sisters single trapeze act. Two years later she married Tommy Hanneford, the comedic star of his family's riding act, one of the best ever. Soon after, she adopted the nom de ring of Princess Tajana, and performed a single trapeze routine, a low wire act, and presented tigers and other exotic cats. After retiring from the ring, she managed the Royal Hanneford Circus along with her husband.

Q: Struppi, tell us about all the acts that you did. I know you started as a trapeze performer.

A: God must have said this young lady's not just going to be ordinary. After the war, I went back to the teacher who taught me when I was seven years old. Her name was Trude Luvass. She already taught me to be a little ballerina. We made a decision after the war was over to team up together. The teacher says why don't we do a double trapeze. I still call her Frau Johann. You don't lose respect for your elders. She was ten years older. So she made the title the Luvass sisters. That's how we arrived in United States with Mills Brothers Circus.

Q: Who found you? Did Jake Mills sign you when you were over there?

A: No, Hans Lederer in April of 1953.

Q: Did you perform on German circuses before?

A: Yeah, Circus Holtzmillers, and then we went over to Circus Scott in Sweden. Then we went to England and Ireland for some dates. We did theatre up in Dublin with the stage show with Alan Jones for a season. We had an offer to go to Spain. To Italy and America. America! I said, "I want to go to see the cowboys and Indians." I arrived in Greenville. Greenville, where? Greenville, America. That's when I found out each state has almost the same towns. So that was the first lesson. Here we came with big steamer trunks and two dogs. We had to bring two dogs, Fox terriers.

So we arrived in Greenville, America. While we were in New York, needless to say we were hungry. We had the two dogs. She had one on the leash. I had one and so we're walking up and down. Oh, I say, I smell food. Cafeteria. Well, we got in and we put the dogs one on each chair. And all of a sudden there was a big, big harrumph going on over there. And I look and I said, oh my God, what's going on over there. Oh God, they said who the heck had nerves to bring the dogs in here? Who is this? Who do the dogs belong to? They threw us out. We never got anything to eat in the cafeteria. We wind up several places. I tried and they wouldn't let us come in with the dogs. So we wound up in the park. What's the famous park?

Q: Central Park.

A: Central Park. So we did Central Park. We sat there. I think we found a bakery. We got some bread. A bagel or something. And we were freezing and cold.



The young Gertrude Zimmerman, left, and her mentor Trude Luvass soon after they arrived in America to appear on Mills Bros. Circus. Struppi Hanneford photo.

So anyway, we arrived in Greenville, Ohio. And the first thing I could see was the tent was laid out. All girls bent over and lacing up the tent. I says, gee, that's strange. Europe—Circus Holtzmillers—no problem. I used to climb up—hung our own rigging. I was a tomboy one way or the other. So I says we gonna lace the tent up again.

The big question was where do we stay? Which trailer? Where's our trailer? There was one bed here. Double bed. And the other one there was a single and that was it. Where do we stay? Well, they already had taken the lower, these two Mexican girls. And you two up there. Wow. I never forget this.

Q: Weren't used to that, were you?

A: We just looked at each other.

Q: Did you, uh, think the Mills Brothers show was bigger than—?

A: Oh, God, yes. No bigger, but at least more living quarters. That's circus. You take one way or the other. Where do we go to the bathroom? Where we go to wash? Have some privacy? Well, a bucket of water costs you twenty-five cents. And they fill it up once you come on the lot and the bathroom—once we get on the lot they dig a hole and they put up a little tent and. . .

We were sitting under the tree over there and we cried and cried and cried.

We had no money to go back. Absolutely broke. Lucky that we made it over there. So, they said, well, tomorrow you don't have to work since you've been on the trip and everything. So the next day we put the rigging up and we did the act. And evidently we surprised them. They did not expect the act we presented. I was hanging by the heels and played the accordion.

But we made a big hit and where would our luggage go. One piece went God knows where in the wagon. The other one went somewhere else. Everything was split up. And to climb up in bed we had a chair and we had to lift ourselves up. And then it started raining and raining and we had to sit up there with the umbrella and I said, "My God, what happened to us?"

Q: What'd you do?

A: I said—the first thing we don't want to complain, but this, this we did not expect.

Then when I started learning to ride the elephant. The elephant was never washed off or brushed off, so it had dirt and sand from all over. My bucket of water cost twenty-five cents. I used to stand and just rinse off. Then the next choice we had tear down. You get a dollar if you help fold the chairs and so I was number one. I folded the chairs, I had a dollar, and I went to the grease joint and had the French fries 'cause I was starved. So we adjusted ourselves. Oh, and to make it real happy, not only was I able to ride the elephant, they gave me a horse called Boy. A black, old horse. And I rode it on the finish.

Q: Hippodrome races?

A: Hippodrome race, thank you. I'm galloping around. Oh, like I said, I'm gonna meet the cowboys and the Indians.

I became a cowgirl. We adjusted and everything went well. The year went by and where did we spend the winter time? We didn't go to Greenville.

Q: Did you do Shrine dates?

A: Not at that time. Al Dobritch stopped by. Evidently the news went around how good the act was and so Mr. Dobritch came around and offered us some dates. He wanted us for Detroit and all the big Shrine dates.

Q: You had the good ones. When you were on Mills, did you have much contact with Jake or Jack?

A: Not much.

Q: Harry?

A: Not much. Not much. They liked us.

Q: Who'd you spend your time with, Nelson?

A: Paul Nelson? Oh, I was scared to death of him. Oh, he had the tough voice. And he was mean. I stayed away from him. I think he was at this time with Jinx Adams. She was gorgeous. Wow. When she used to come around the hippodrome—the racetrack with the horses and she stood up there and her hair flying.

Q: When you traveled from town to town, were you in the trailer?

A: You were supposed to stay in the trailer. But, not me. I didn't stay in the trailer. . . . I say I'm gonna ride with you up front. I was on a spring, I was riding on a spring and I say, don't you have a pillow so we can sit? And we got lost one time somewhere around Washington. I tried to help the guy find the arrows and so forth. And we got lost and we arrived late on the lot. And I really was scared—we did find our way back home through arrows and backing up. When we finish with the second year, I saved \$900.

Q: Wow—that's good.

A: Which was doggone good because by the time they took the expenses out and the passport and so forth, I used to get I think like \$25 a week. And out of the \$25, I collected and sent some to support my family back home because when you go to America, they all think you come to America and become a millionaire. Well, it took a long time—I'm still not a millionaire. I'm still working on it. But, I don't think I'm gonna make it. *(laughs)* But, long story short, we had \$900. We bought a little Jeep which was boxed in and we put our rigging in there and we drove off the lot, thank you.

Golden, Colorado. That was our big trip out there and we found a little old wagon, like a little garbage trailer, but it was pretty. It had a little canvas top. And you let the curtain down, and you opened it up and some mattress that was tied up. We let the mattress down. At nighttime we unload the rigging. So, we had to leave and get into Chicago for Mills Brothers. Well, I was in the left lane but I'm supposed to make a right turn. So Frau Johann says, hold on. Let me



The great George Hanneford, Sr. riding act, early 1950s. Kay Francis, Tommy, and George, Jr. are atop the horse while mother Kathryn and George, Sr. admire them. Pfening Archives.

get out, let me get out. So she jumped out while I was going slow and we stopped traffic so I could make the turn. Oh, that they didn't arrest us! I mean, oh, I have to laugh. So, we learned how to drive. God was with us, we didn't get hurt.

Q: Did you like America from the get-go?

A: Oh, I loved every minute of it. I'm an old circus girl. Nothing spoiled me. I could be the richest lady today and I still would be doing what I'm doing because once you have it in you—

Q: I can understand that.

A: Tommy [Hanneford] didn't leave me as a rich lady. Because Tommy, he was a fantastic performer, a great producer. He had a God-given talent! Don't ask him to take a screwdriver and fix something because he would ruin everything there. But, when he came to put his shows on—wow!

He would spend the money before I got it. It's gone already. So, that was the big battle always. But, he was proud and like I say, we worked ourselves out.

Q: You had some great shows—like in Milwaukee in the Circus Parade. Those were fabulous.

A: Sure. After two years of being in the regular, down-to-earth circus, so we came up to Golden, Colorado, to a rodeo. And, somewhere, we bought a rigging, it was a ladder and you have to put up ten sections together to make it high. And we put our rigging up upside down and this way and a few more up. And anyway, all this rigging came down into the back of the car trailer and at nighttime when we want to sleep and stopped someplace, we had to unload and let the mattress down and hide out in there. Talk about elegant.

So, we came to Golden, Colorado, and we went up to the mountains and Buffalo Bill's grave. Lookout Mountain. I was in America. We played a rodeo and I saw my cowboys, and I saw Buffalo Bill. So, that made my whole dream. Oh, I was the happiest girl



Glamour portrait of Struppi as Princess Tajana, Goddess of Flight, late 1950s, early 1960s. Struppi Hanneford photo.

the language—I spoke pretty good by that time—but they said, no we can't. Because of immigration. It's against the law. So, there we were again.

So, we were in Philadelphia, no money, no food. I had enough money to go across the street and get canned food for the dogs. In fact, one time I got the cans and opened one up and it looked good—that it would be good with a cracker and something. I tasted it. And I thought, Oh my God, if I get hungry, I could get a can of that and eat it.

It got so bad that Hans Lederer asks if Frau Johann to go to New York to the Radio City Music Hall and see if we could hang the rigging there. So, with our last penny she drove—took the bus over and she found, needless to say, Radio City, and she came back and she says, sure, we can hang it. Then I called Hans Lederer, or tried to call him. Oh no, he's over in Vienna. He's not going to come for weeks. I said, I'm sitting. I'm hungry. I don't know what to do. He says, well honestly, I don't know what to tell you. What to do. So, my last way out, was to call Mr. Sid Stevenson. And we made him our so-called Sugar Daddy. We called and said, please Mr. Stevenson. We're sitting here in Philadelphia. We have no money. So please, could you help us? When we get a job, we pay you back. He send us money. And he helped us to continue during the winter, to get over it. He took us down to Hugo, Oklahoma, to Carson & Barnes winter quarters. We spent a few weeks up there. . . . But Mr. Stevenson help us there until we had work and held us up until Detroit.

Q: What can you tell us about Al Dobritch? What it was like dealing with him?

A: Well, actually, Al Dobritch discovered us. And he knew, right there, that he had something good on his hands because we found out when we arrived in Detroit that all of the Shriners thought oh boy, she is pretty sharp looking and then they all come and they all want to take pictures with you and so forth. So we arrived in Detroit and we practiced and as soon as we appeared, it went successfully. It was so successful that a young man by the name of Tommy Hanneford laid eyes on me.

Q: Oh, that's where you met?

A: Yes. He took my hand and says, would you like to have a cup of coffee? I take you for a cup of coffee. And that's how it started. By the time the 17 days were over, we became acquainted. Then it was Wichita, Kansas, and then from there we went home and the next year we got quietly married in Chicago.

in the world. But I just remember how we managed to go through the bad times. Mills Brothers season was over. Hans Lederer promised us work in the winter-time, and so we finished somewhere near Philadelphia. We wound up in an old hotel which gave the cheapest rents and the two dogs they put downstairs in the basement. And the hotel was for the elderly, retired people and drunks off the street and homeless. I mean, it was one of the bad ones and there was just absolutely nothing else. And I tried to find a job someplace. Across the street was a little restaurant, if I could wash dishes or something.

They knew right there I'm—well,

Q: This was when, 1955?

A: Yes, 1955. *(laughs)*

Q: Were you on a Polack date?

A: No, no, that came afterwards.

We got married. And then, I finished contracts with Frau Johann. And Tommy worked with the family. And we called back and forth every night. So he says, look, you better tell Frau Johann the season is over but I want you. We're married and we're spending hours every night talking on the phone. So I made a trip. I arranged for Johann to meet Peter, her son, Peter Luvas.

Q: Sure.

A: And she did the act with him. She trained him. So, I picked up Tommy's car, which he says was in Tampa. He says, you take it and drive out to Los Angeles or wherever they were. Well, I had a flat tire, the first thing. So, I opened the back of the trunk to see where is the spare. What did I see? Nothing but cigars, ties, Crown Royal bags. I says, where the hell is the spare tire? That was the beginning that I says, oh, my God, Tommy! He's a playboy! He's got nothing but fun and all that. Then I drove practically day and night, all my hours to see him. So I came out there and they had a party going on for us, a get-together. And Gene Randow, the clown, walks up to me and says, hey, nice seeing you again. I hope you make Tommy as happy as I did. I says, What do you mean, what do you mean? And he laughed, and he walked away. Well, he floored me, he spoiled me and I says, what does that mean? You made Tommy as happy as I did. So from that day on, whenever I saw Gene Randow coming, I walked away. And I told Tommy, what did he mean he made you as happy as I did? Oh, he says, he's kidding, he's teasing you. And anyway, that was the ending with Gene.

Q: I can see why you wouldn't care for him after that.

A: But no, no, we all became pals. Little Harold Simmons? And Gene, those two worked together. We were good from then on.

We went for our honeymoon out to Las Vegas. End of the season, we came home to Florida. And Tommy says, you stay in the motel, we not gonna separate. So, father-in-law gave Luvas Sisters, Tommy his room and so forth. So Tommy says, so now it's time we have to tell them that we're married.

Q: Oh, they didn't know still?

A: No. Nobody knew. So we went first to his parents and tell them. And Kay Hanneford, his sister, says, oh, congratulations! So we got that over. And then I had to go and tell my teacher. I had promised her whenever I fall in love, I tell you. Well, I lied like heck. So I felt so bad and I had to go in and tell her. She says, oh I knew. You come in late—sometimes, too late, at night. And to Tommy, she says, And you! You steal my partner! That was, that was that.

Publicity photo of Struppi in her full Princess Tajana grab. Pfening Archives.



Q: How did you get into doing the Princess Tajana and the cats and the aerial and all the stuff?

A: Well, it all fell into place. And, needless to say, I was not prepared to do the single trapeze act. So the first year when we joined up, we got married and we flew out to Las Vegas for our honeymoon. And he bought me a nice swimming suit, sunglasses, and set me down by the swimming pool. Brought me a glass—one of the nice, fancy ones. "Now you sit here. I'll be back in a little while. Enjoy the drink and enjoy the sunshine." Well, I did this and I'm sitting there and just waiting and waiting and waiting. What the heck? So about an hour, an hour and a half [later] he says, Let's go! We gotta go home! I says, home. Home, where? "No, we got to fly home, I lost all the money."

Q: Ohhh!

A: I said, what?! I had money saved from the Mills Brothers, gave [it] to him and he says, "I lost all the money, we gotta go home." So that's what we did. We went home. And that's when the whole thing started. As soon as we go home, father-in-law says, well, you got to pay the money back, they want to take your Buick away. The payments are due. Tommy says, "oh yeah, well, ok, ok." Next one, his brother is saying, you got any money for me to pay back the loan? How about Kay's?

I say, oh my God, what am I married to? To a playboy? Oh my God! And then, I open up the drawers and all the girls' pictures—the movie stars from Mexico. "To my amigo, Tom. . . ." Well, I start learning from the beginning that Tommy [is] a great lover-boy, and he absolutely fell in love with me and I fell in love with him and we just got married. And there it was.

And so, he continued on with the act. And what am I going to do? And knowing Tommy, he started right there. He made me a single trapeze and while they did the [riding] acts, I put the act together, the single trapeze act.

Q: Now you were all playing pretty much just produced dates by Dobritch and Orrin Davenport, and people like that, right?

A: Yes, Orrin Davenport had the Detroit date. And [then] we went to Polack Brothers.

Q: For Louie?

A: Yes, Mr. Louis Stern. Always "Mr. Stern" to me. So we went to him and he says, "I have to talk it over with Mrs."

Q: Bessie. Bessie Pollack.

A: Yes, Bessie So I had to audition the act and Happy Hallelujah, we were together with the family engaged and then made a production out of it. And Tommy's idea was coming in on a horse and with the Indian theme.

George and Victoria Hanneford, 1982. Struppi Hanneford photo.



Which was Tommy's idea, with an Indian theme. He copied that from —

Q: The Hodginis, maybe.

A: They did a wire act—the name disappeared—she came in as an Indian princess. She did low-wire. . . . One of the famous names. I forget her name.

Anyway, it became a big production. On the other hand was also George and Vicki put together that beautiful perch act of theirs.

Q: The Victorias.

A: I mean a fabulous act, fabulous wardrobe. And there was this slight jealousy going on between

Kay Hanneford, and Victoria, and I was the fifth wheel on the wagon. So needless to say, I stayed in the background. But everything turned out to be ok and was successful. And well—

Q: Did you get along good with George Senior and your mother-in-law and the rest of the Hannefords?

A: They liked me. Yeah, they liked me very much.

Q: Did you and Vicki get along ok?

A: Vicki was a great, great talented person. She was the leader in the wardrobe. She had the best wardrobe. And when Vicki wanted something she fought for it, and she had a mouth on her. She let loose and the F'n language and everything was just flying.

I only had one argument with her right at the beginning of the year. When we finally decided I'd do the single trapeze act, I'd also do the walk upside down. We heard that they had a little truck and a box in the back of it where they stayed. And somebody says, "Do you know that she got loops in there? She's practicing loops every night. And Tommy says, "Well, that's a hell of a thing, we're supposed to be on the same show, with two loop acts." He says, "Hey, why don't you go over and ask her if she does the loop work or not. If it's true, then maybe you can do something else." And me, like a dummy, go over and ask her. And she says to me, "Who the hell do you think you are? You're nothing but a German harlequin broad!"

I mean, she had me flattened out in two minutes. And I got hot under the collar when I heard that she did the high act.

I say, "I'm a German harlequin but you're nothing but a ballet broad!" I went back to Tommy and I cried. I say, "Why did you send me over to these mean people? Why?" Anyway, that was the only argument we had 100 years ago.

That was the first year when we were together. From then on I straightened everything out, and good. And today, I mean, I just absolutely cannot understand why God let her die the way she did.

Q: She had a tough end, yeah.

A: All by herself, swallowed her own saliva, and had to die like this. I mean, I'm so saddened by that. She didn't deserve that because she was a fighter. And she won most battles. Her kids got the best training, the best schooling. George [Hanneford] called me the other day on my birthday. His birthday I think is September. . . .



Tommy and Struppi Hanneford in 1963. Cliff Glotzbach photo, Pfening Archives.



Struppi in her Princess Tajana wardrobe, 1967. Cliff Glotzbach photo, Pfening Archives.

Q: Your brother-in-law, George?

A: Yeah. It was quite nice. He is spending a lot of time down with Jenny Wallenda. She's taking him under her wing because they left him behind. He has nobody. He's all by himself.

Q: Both the kids out on the road?

A: The kids are on the road, yes. I mean Kathy is right there on the Ringling show, I think, right now. And Georgie presents the elephants. So anyway, he's spending time with Jenny Wallenda. Jenny takes care of him and they're pals now and so let's see what the day will bring. But, otherwise life continues.

Q: Were you in the big riding act when Tommy was doing the Riding Fool?

A: I did the riding act. One day in 1962, Al Dobritch called from Los Angeles, he says we're going out there to make a movie, *Jumbo*.

The movie people asked who he had to do the riding stunts. He says, "Nobody right now, but give me a couple of days, maybe a week, and soon I'll have someone for you. Who is it? Well, Struppi. Struppi! Well, that means every morning run about, run, jump, run, jump, run, jump and they help me up one jump. Run, jump. Well, I got it. But if I would have been alone I couldn't stand on a horse.

So we got out to Los Angeles. I became Martha Ray. Tommy was Steven Boyd. Kay was Doris Day and Enrico was Jimmy Durante. So we did the first jump. I made it. And then they say stop. We cannot jump this way. We got the line-up. Steven Boyd, Doris Day, Martha Ray, and then, Jimmy Durante. So I became Jimmy Durante. But we made it, we had to do four times, one right after another, then we gave the horse a rest and Doris Day, I remember, she walked the horse. And we got that one over with.

And Tommy found a beautiful horse for me to make an entrance, a leopard Appaloosa. And we made the entrance out there. I came in [as] the flying goddess of flight.

What an entrance I made.

Q: Tell us about your cat act. Had you ever been in a cage with lions before you started?

Where'd you buy them from?

A: Frank Simpson's animal act. He had three pumas, and two leopards. And he was working with us. I fell from the horse, I landed in the ring. I had a mechanic on. But, Enrico hurt his foot and Tommy says, just run toward the horse and jump off again. I did this, I slipped or I was tired and I flipped and pulled all the tendons in there. That was in Winnipeg, night time, when they pulled me up.

So that was the end of the Princess Tajana and that's, later on, that's when I gave up. That's it. I don't want to be nothing anymore.

Just go in the background, you do your circus up front, leave me alone. But Tommy, needless to say, he says no way. He went to Frank, says, "Is there any way you could try my wife Struppi out, see if she has any talent for animals and so forth?" He says, "Maybe she could take the act over from you. He gave me that big stick with the round thing and we went together in the cage and one of the pumas left the seat and I had the tongue right there. He says, "She's got it. She's got the talent."

Q: Were you scared to death?

A: No. Strangely enough, no. So that was the beginning of Frank Simpson's. We practiced and practiced. He left and I had the cats, we presented that, then he came back with the little tiger. And that little tiger became Tommy the Tiger. That was my single opening. He says, "I take my act back, but I gave you a present here, and he said get your own act together because [you] got the talent now, you got the training." So Tommy, sharp as he was, went to Trevor [Bale], he says, "We got a new thing, we got a little tiger. We got to have a tiger act together." He went to Jackson, Mississippi and came back with three, four tigers, big, huge tigers. Trevor Bale says, "Tommy, what you trying to do, kill Struppi?" He says, "You think you can go in with animals that big like this? So I think he kept one or two of them, and Tommy got rid of them. So anyway, Trevor began to start working and practicing and my little tiger, Tommy the Tiger, that's how I named him, and when the season started next year I had a little tiger act together.

And that's how this whole thing started. And then I lost Tommy the Tiger in Muncie, Indiana. Late at night I went in, he barked or something and next morning he was dead. Choked on something.

So I lost all that beautiful work. I had little Ina, the elephant. I made a leather blanket for her, protection over her head. And we can ride in on the elephant. And get up on the pedestal and the tiger jumps up. Gunther Gabel [Williams]. I wanted to be Gunther Gabel, I guess, and I did. I presented it once in Chapel Hill.

Just one, one time with everything. Tommy ordered blankets from New York. Beautiful blankets, everything, extra wardrobe. I mean thousands of dollars he spent. So I had my debut, once complete, and then a couple of weeks later, poor Tommy the Tiger died on me.

And I almost had a nervous breakdown.

I lost two big animals, my heart, my entrance—my entrance horse, Spangles the leopard Appaloosa, he died on July the 6th, and Tommy the Tiger choked. And God knows what it was. So that's when I gave up. Then I gave up and took over the elephants, drove the elephant truck, and cleaned and polished and scraped—

Q: I know you remember that year you ended up in Baraboo. Remember, that's when Poindexter died. What a mess.

A: Yes. And Poindexter died. Yeah, dropped dead. They called, hey, Poindexter just dropped dead. What? Oh my God. That's when I say, "I gotta get out of here, take me home, Tommy, I can't take it." And we were together again and so I became the animal trainer. The animal groomer, I should say.

Q: Something I wanted to ask you about is, when you guys started, I think it was 1972, you hooked up with Bill English and I think Art Concello was involved in this. And you took out your own show.

A: Bill English hired us. He was the one who hired us with the circus show. Yes. The beginning was Wakefield, Massachusetts. That's where we originated. That gave us the idea about putting a little show together. And that went so nicely and successfully that Tommy got together with Bill English.

Q: Didn't you do a lot of phone dates with Bill?

A: He was the phone promoter. He kept the dates. That's when I

had to climb up in the rigging and hang the show, 'til finally, Billy Bob came and helped me.

Q: You must have done pretty well with English. He was one of the best.

A: Well, we did good, we did good. Until I don't know what went wrong, but all of a sudden he fell behind quite many weeks where he couldn't pay us anymore. And then he says, "Look, things are getting tough."

Q: How was Concello involved with you folks?

A: I really don't know. All I know is that Concello was, needless to say, a favorite. I mean, Tommy was a favorite to him, but businesswise, what they did, Bill English and Concello, I don't know, tell you the truth.

All I know [is] my part is to get into the buildings. Get up in the girders. Hang the rigging. And I had Billy Bob with me, and one time it got so bad, up, up there, tear down, tear down, after the show, get up in the morning, get into the next day, and one time I think I fell asleep up in the girders. And then Billy with his language up there used to cuss and all this and so we just had quite a deal. We went up to Canada. He booked us way up north in Manitoba.

Q: You're way west.

A: So anyway, whatever it was, it was successful, 'til finally, it came to an end. The gentleman who presented the show, the announcer, was Phillip Morris. He used to walk in by 11:00 o'clock. Tommy says by 11:00 o'clock we got the show hung because Phil's coming in, he's inspecting, he used to come in with a leather coat, and little German Hiel Hitler stick under his arm and he walked in and I sit up there. He used to drive me nuts, I hated that man! And I told him that he walked in like, like a big, like one of those Gestapos, you know, looking at everything and walked out again. And here I am, dead tired, and well, Billy Martin, I think he let a few loose at one time earlier, you know. So I told him off. I told Phil, I say, "You are the most hated man in my career, walking in with a stick and the leather coat. He says, "Oh, I'm sorry." But then he started out with us. Later the show got big and Tommy rented the wardrobe from Phillip Morris.

Q: Phillip Morris has done great.

A: Oh, God, yes. As a matter of fact, he just called me the other day. "Struppi," he says, "I've got some elephant blankets if you want 'em, you can have 'em. Doesn't cost you anything." I says, "Ok, I'll let you know." I say, "I got elephant blankets but I have no more elephants." So I don't know which one is better.

Q: Are your elephants, is Mark [Karlo] taking care of your elephants?

A: They are all gone. All my girls are gone.

Q: I'm sorry.

A: That—that broke my heart. I'm done with it. I'm out every Hanneford Circus elephant semi-trailer, 1972. Pfening Archives.



morning, see Tim [Frisco] and the elephants. Wash them, wash them, taking care of them, yeah, they're well taken care of.

I never finished talking about my little tiger act. I put a beautiful tiger act together. I practiced night and day and then I had to leave all my tigers behind in winter quarters because the season started and Tommy says we gotta go. And we had the tigers for years in the same place, same place. And I say, "Why don't we hire a man? Let him come in here, present the animals, the tigers and then back again." Well, we hired a guy and the first thing he did is don't want this tiger, don't want that one because there are my tigers, they love me.

Q: Yeah, they weren't used to that.

A: Ooh. And a few years ago, all these trainers were little bit tougher than what they were allowed to be, but I found a couple of fangs in the arena because I hear there's a pretty tough beating on the animals. So I stayed in the beginning watching him. And as long I was there everything was nice and good.

Anyway he presented the act once. But my great opening was, with the big tiger act, was Detroit. And that was big opening. . . .

Q: That would have probably been Dobritch by that time.

A: Yeah, that was Dobritch. But it was the great big opening—Princess Tajana presents the tiger act. And I went in and first tiger, the first tiger came out, the second tiger um platz [your spot], um platz. And the third one, Toby, Obie, Obie, goofy, he comes out, and he walks up front, in front in the cage, up and down. Obie um platz! Um platz! Bang the things! He didn't even see me, that animal, he just kept walking, walking.

And I say, "Tommy, what am I gonna do?" He says, "Just keep going. See if you can get him um platz." I say, "He's not going, he's not going." He says, "Let the other tigers in." So while all the others they going in um platz and watching that, why the heck is this thing going back and forth and not going um platz? Well, that lasted till I turned white, 'til my mouth was dry. Then I say, "I'm passing out, Tommy, I can't do it anymore. What am I gonna do?" So I did a few tricks with some and then I, I send them home, all the tigers except him. He wouldn't even go home in the cage.

So, all the other tigers are out and this other guy goes back and forth. I say, "Tommy come in." So he come in and with a stick and the chair and then he yells, "Go bring a piece of meat." So the guy comes with a big slab of meat, so we hung that on the stick and showed it to him and tried. He ignored that one, too.

And now by that time, the whole building is full of people. They all knew I had trouble. And next thing, the trainer, he held the cage and the cage cleaner, he took another chair, so the three of us, we went and held the chair, and just pushed him back, pushed him back. And they opened the door and he heard the door and he shot in the door. Well, by that time Princess Tajana was half dead.

Q: I'll bet!

A: And Tommy says, Tommy says, "Let's go finish the act!" Finish what act? Uh! The elephant was waiting outside, little Ina. She was waiting on the front side, I'm supposed to come out, jump up on top of Ina. Take the black panther around and then walk out. I made it up to the elephant, I had the black panther there and soon I was behind the curtain. They took the cat from me. I went home in the trailer, and I start crying, crying, crying.

Ruined my whole debut. How embarrassing, how bad! The next day, front page, *Detroit News*, big picture, Tiger Trainer—Tiger Lady in Trouble with Tigers! All the Shriners come, say, "Can you do that again tonight?"

Q: (laughs)

A: 'Cause that's the best publicity we had for this whole freaking thing. I say, "Wow." So anyway that was the tiger act."

Q: What happened to that tiger then? Did he get back to normal?

A: We took him out. What drove him crazy in Detroit, they had those dollies with the iron wheels and they rolled the cart that brought more Coca-Cola in, and that noise evidently got to him.

That's what we figured out. So what we had to do, we get up in the morning, put him in the arena, and they drove by with those things. . . .

Q: Oh, to get him used to it.

A: And that's where he, right there, from then little by little, got used to it. So he was, later on he was in the act.

Q: Did he turn out to be a pretty good cat in the act?

A: Well, Obie was a little goofy. I had in mind to teach him the hind leg walk. For a box of corn flakes. The tiger, you know, wants to go for it but he never got it.

Q: I've always heard that there's a pretty big range of intelligence among lions and tigers. You know, one will be able to do a lot more than another.

A: Oh, yeah. Well, I like the tigers better to work with than I like lions.

Q: I've heard that they're smarter. Did you feel like that?

A: Yeah, definitely. I feel like that definitely is. But there's some goofballs, some good ones, some bad ones. Like everything else.

Q: Yeah, like people.

A: Like kids. You got to train them, and you find out what they like most, and that's where you aim to train them a little bit more. I was the one who trained Pasha. Pasha was jumping up on the mirror ball and sitting up, and when the ball and I start turning around, how [do] you try to get the tiger first thing when that pedestal starts turning, zip! He was gone.

So, get him back up again, then I had to get a big, long, pipe, and forked it so that I had to walk around, give him little food, little meat, no whipping, no beating, I mean that was strictly out of the question. Tommy, by the way, he came in the cage. He trained them all to sit up, too. We both became tiger trainers.

So one time when in the cage, Tommy says to do a roll over, triple roll over, and we're both in there, roll, roll, and he says, "You've got to hit them from the back. Touch them with the whip from the back." So I touched one with the whip from the back, and the tiger came forward, and he knocked me flying. Tommy got him out, out of the cage. I say, "Is that what you do to me? To hit them from the back and I get chewed up?" From that time we realized if both of us are in the cage, it's no good because if they attack us, nobody's there to help us. So he stayed outside, and he guided me on the inside. You learn so much; it's amazing. I never in my dear life would I ever dream that I would be either with elephants, horses, yes, horses I did love all the time, but tigers and high wire and all this stuff. I just never believed that these things would happen to me.

Q: Tell the story about in the spring of 1968, when you were out in Los Angeles, on the Dobritch date and the riots after Dr. Martin Luther King was killed.

A: That was another big deal. Everybody stays in the buildings, and don't move and keep it quiet and everybody just did not know what on heaven's earth went on.

Q: You guys opened a day or two before King was murdered.

A: Yes.

Q: I've met other people who were on that date, and they said it was just awful after the shooting. Business was just nothing.

A: Oh, absolutely.

Q: I think that ruined Dobritch, didn't it?

A: That was most likely, yes. That was the end of Dobritch as a producer. I'll never forget him standing there, the flat bed trailer moved in, all the people just grabbed whatever they could, they stole



The Royal Hanneford Circus was a part of the Great Circus Parade in Milwaukee for many years. This photo was taken in 1990. Fred D. Pfening, Jr. photo, Pfening Archives.

[everything] from whips to cables. And I still see that man, standing there with a cigarette, just smoking. And that dirty flat bed, whatever was left was loaded on there.

Q: Who was stealing the stuff?

A: The performers. They didn't get paid so. . . .

Q: Oh, they were taking all the stuff Dobritch owned.

A: They just took whatever he owned. It was the saddest ending to this man. I mean, he was good to us. He liked the family, the Hanneford family. Gave us a lot of work. . . .

Q: I've heard a lot of bad things about him, though.

A: Well, unfortunately—

Q: But not from you.

A: But no, he was great with us. I cannot say anything bad because he put me on the Ed Sullivan show. Many times. I was one of his proud acts. He got me places and introduced me to—

We didn't get much money on the Sullivan show. Because Mr. Dobritch told us, hey, just get there and when you get off the trapeze and he by any chance motions you to come over and shake hands with him. I finished the act, and he called over Princess Tajana! And he gave me a kiss.

Dobritch says, "You got it made!" He says, "That's gonna be great publicity. I book you any place and everywhere." And it worked.

Q: I've never heard a circus person say a bad thing about Ed Sullivan.

A: No, no.

Q: Did you ever hear the story about when Beatty went on the Sullivan show? It was just a mess because the cats were all spooked being in a different environment. So he ended up fighting them the whole time and they finally just closed the curtains and that was it.

A: Well, that's when you got animals, you never know. You never know what's happening. My opening debut, in Detroit . . . I thought it was bad, but then it straightened out. And there were a few more incidents like that. With animals, you never know what's happening.

Q: So did you pretty much have your own show after 1972, 1973 with English?

A: Yeah, then Glenn Parkins.

Q: You have a lot of business ability, Struppi.

A: And I have nobody, we don't send out new dates. You know, like you're supposed to? Nobody does anything anymore. We just wait till the Shrine rebooks us again and some new stuff comes in. At times I get a little bit upset. Now, Billy [Martin] tries to promote some of the dates, but there is big competition out there. Everybody works cheap and the Shrine now—

Q: The Shriners have gotten so small.

A: Yeah. There's no newcomers.



The Royal Hanneford Circus big top at the Meadowlands Fair in New Jersey, June and July 2005. Show day and dated Cirque du Soleil whose yellow and blue tent can be seen in the back right. Paul Gutheil photo.

Q: Yeah, but I'll tell you what, it's a long way from when you guys used to play the Columbus Shrine Circus for seventeen days. You'd bring Mark Karoly in, and the Woodcocks and Lou Ann Jacobs and George Barreda, and lots of others. You and Tommy produced some first-class shows. Now Columbus is four days.

A: All these people are stars now. They all got their own acts now, some their own shows. They all, wait—some of them are trying to take dates away from me. I have noticed.

I lost New Orleans for this year.

Q: You've had that for years.

A: New Orleans for 35 years.

Q: What do you think is going to happen with the Shrine Circus?

A: They're not gonna go completely away because there's always some promotion.

Q: Some. But look at the size of that Moslem Temple date in Detroit. That used to be the biggest Shrine Circus in the country.

A: And they're dying out. Slowly, but surely. So what they do, like us, we used to do two-three weeks and now you get a weekend, three days.

Q: It has to be hard to make a living doing that, with all the travel and overhead.

A: And the worst of it all is the insurance now. With the insurance I have all the performers under workers' comp, and by the time you pay workers' comp and this and that and well, life is a rollercoaster.

Q: I was really struck last week when you were telling me about how you're still driving this bus [in which you live on the road] and you won't let anybody else touch it.

A: So what? All you do is just watch. You've got to watch yourself that you don't fall asleep. That's all. Hey, I come from the old school, and it pays off.

Q: I remember Tommy coming and showing it off to us.

A: Oh, Tommy. He was very sick at that time. Everybody thought he was dying except me.

I actually escaped with him from Rochester [Minnesota]. I'm supposed to put him in a rehab, and I looked for several rehabs and there's no way, I'm gonna rehab him myself.

Q: Do you still have your date in Des Moines at that park? In the summer?

A: I'm the only circus lady who has three parks. We had three parks this year. I had a park at Des Moines, which we're up there now fifteen-sixteen years. We had the park over in Ligonier, in Pittsburgh, and I have a park up in Story Land, up in New Hampshire. That's my fourth year. The only one missing is the one in Baraboo. I have not returned to that one yet.

Q: Are you doing much Shrine stuff anymore?

A: Yeah, that's all we do. The only self-promoted date I got is White Plains, New York. God forbid, and God be with me, if that ever goes bad. Mrs. Hanneford is gonna sell hamburgers at McDonalds.

Q: You knew a lot about the business end of this stuff before Tommy passed away, didn't you?

A: That's one thing I had, whenever there was no money, Tommy says, well, you handle it.

Q: I always thought you were the money end of this thing.

A: Either I had to go get a loan, get to the bank or find a friend to bail us out. Oh, yeah. We had a few dates where there's a few thousand came and I say, oh my God, show business is beautiful if you got money. But there's been too many of the ones where the—all the performers, great show, fantastic. Even this year we had dates where the Shrine packed [them in], I mean unbelievable. And when you ask for a certain amount of money, hey, by the time you transport everything back and forth, there's not much left. And show business gets [to be] a challenge, now. Now what's next, you know? And how you gonna do it? So we had those three parks and they pulled us nicely. . . .



Recent photo of Struppi watching her beloved circus. Paul Gutheil photo.

Q: You and Tommy couldn't have gotten rich off of Milwaukee when you were playing those parades?

A: No. No, no. The only thing was when Tommy invested in the ten thousand dollar air conditioner. One day. He had the air conditioner and everybody says oh, great! And the next day it turned cold and the air conditioner, they never used it after that.

Q: I remember when you had more performers in Milwaukee than you could put in the show and you rotated the show up there.

A: Yep, yep.

Q: Remember the time Dana Allen, with the sea lions. And the USDA were going to confiscate the seals, and you [Greg Parkinson] put all those spray nozzles in the cage and the guy wouldn't tell you, he wouldn't tell us if he'd confiscate them or not. And this poor girl thought she was going to get all her seals taken away from her.

A: Oh, God, yes.

Q: Remember that? That was just awful. They did everything that the USDA asked.

And then they wouldn't approve it.

A: They got me one time down in Milwaukee, too, where they wanted to quarantine the elephants. And the (TB) test is out in Ames, Des Moines. Well, Mrs. Hanneford jumped in a car, drove all night long, drove over to Ames, 9:00 o'clock they opened up, everything looks good and clean, and that's when they let us present the elephants. Later, I drove somewhere down south and I had a call from back home, hey, you better get home in winter quarters, one of your elephants got TB.

And it wound up that I kept all three elephants home that summer and that was an ordeal. Had to hire elephants, different acts and this and that and, oh my God, two hundred and some-odd thousand dollars later . . . out the door like nothing.

Q: Well, that's the way you make money in the Shrine circus business was owning your elephants.

A: Sure.

Q: Then you'd get the ride money and all that, you know.

A: We owned the elephants, the horses, the tigers, the riding act. We had the four animal acts.

But the mistake Tommy made, we never paid ourselves. We worked all our acts, we fed them, but we never took salaries. Would we have taken salaries like paying all the performers, I don't think I would be playing circus today. I would be sitting somewhere on a beach and having a good time, you know. But I think I would be bored anyways.

Q: You still live at the motel?

A: The motel is still there. And that was another mistake I made. A few years ago they offered me quite a few million dollars for that property and I said no later, in a few more years. And then. . .

Q: Then the market fell down.

A: Now nothing's happening, so we got it as winter quarters, sitting down there. .

Q: It was so much fun at the [Milwaukee] parades.

A: The big excitement, the thing I liked about the parade we had,

the elephants got into the food coloring. Tommy dyed the shavings red, and Ina got hold of the sugar thing and they all looked like they were bleeding, and I tried to scrape it off, wash it off, brush it off but the doggone stuff wouldn't come off. It was right around the trunk, you know, and the mouth and they looked like we beat them, that they were bleeding to death.

But it was beautiful. Great, great weather. I always loved coming over the bridge and you could see all the tents and everything.

And the nicest part was when we got that tent up and we were all inside. It looked like some rain coming up and we were christening the tent and it was just the performers in there. Then all of a sudden the whole tent was full of people and we only had two bottles of champagne. So I went outside and there was the most gorgeous rainbow right over the new tent. And I said, well that's christening. And here comes the rest. And the tent has always been very good, very beautiful.

Q: What's still out there that you want to do? That you haven't done?

A: I just always want to be remembered as being a good, nice, kind lady and a go-getter. To be very ambitious, and I think I achieved pretty much everything one can achieve in my category.

A: You don't have to worry one bit about people remembering you that way 'cause everybody will. You're like a rock star in this business.

You're famous! Because of all this stuff. There aren't very many men or women who did as much stuff as you've done.

A: And health wise, mind you, I had cancer, I got two hip replacements and I have one good day, one bad day, but I'm cancer free.

Q: Do you have any pain in your hips?

A: In the back. Old age pain, but everybody has that.

So God's been very good. I mean, I'm very grateful. I think I'm going to be around maybe a few more years. I don't want to get too old, to be pushed around in a wheelchair, God forbid. Unfortunately, Tommy had a stroke—speech, couldn't talk. . . I spent day and night, and night and day with him. I pushed him around in the wheelchair up here. I took good care of him 'til . . . bless his heart.

At times he was a tough man to be with.

Q: Oh, I don't doubt that.

A: Showbiz was his goal. And get out of my way, showbiz here I come. So you let him do it and he was able to put some shows together where everybody finished, he opened the show, shot the cannon in the beginning. What the heck you gonna do on the finish? I figure it out. And that's how the whole thing started.

Q: He had a flare. There's no question about it. Of the Shrine dates and all that kind of stuff, they were just wonderful.

A: Part of that was because he didn't have any money sense. (laughs)

Q: You know if he'd had money sense, he wouldn't have done the stuff that he did.

A: Yes. Yes.

Our drivers (are) arriving, coming from Florida tomorrow night, you should see it. This thing goes down overnight, tear down, tear down, tear down, load up, load up, load up, shoot down to Perry, Georgia, and by Thursday evening, 8:00 o'clock, we are supposed to put on a show.

Q: Is that a Shrine date in Perry?

A: Fair.

Q: Have we worn you out yet? Pretty close, haven't we?

A: No, the trouble is I have to excuse because I have a door here in the bus. It's automatic and doesn't wanna open up.

Q: Is there anything we can do to help you out here?

A: Yeah, you wanna fix the door? **BW**

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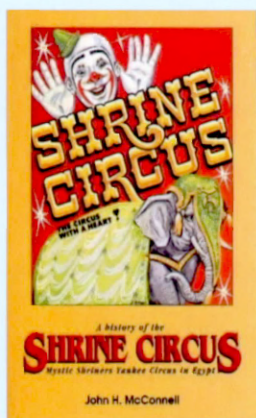
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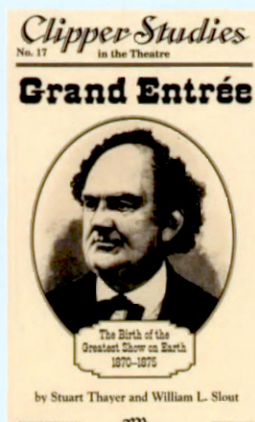
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